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**Women's Participation in  
Community Development Projects:  
The Case of Khmu Women in Laos**

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A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Applied Science  
in International Rural Development

at

Lincoln University

by

K. Vixathep

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Lincoln University

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## **Abstract**

Abstract of a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
requirements for the Degree of M.Apl.Sc.

### **Women's Participation in Community Development Projects: The Case of Khmu Women in Laos**

By K. Vixathep

This thesis explores Khmu women's participation in community development projects in Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR. Although the Khmu is the second largest ethnic group in Laos, they are also the poorest. Throughout the history of Laos, the Khmu have lacked political power, education and a role in administration. Consequently, they have lagged behind in socio-economic development. While Lao women in general show interest in participating in development projects, Khmu women do not seem to share the same motivation. To gain an understanding of their participation or the lack of it, this study explores the barriers women face to participating in project activities. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community? What are the barriers and how do they overcome them? What is the role of development partners in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects? To answer these questions this study employed qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews and observations with community members, project staff and the Lao Women's Union (LWU). The LWU is a governmental organisation that represents and promotes the interests of women and children of all ethnic groups.

This study is conducted in two Khmu villages, in different locations and with different levels of development geography and livelihoods. One is officially identified as poor and recently resettled and the other one is on a main road which has easy access. Both are project villages for World Vision Laos.

In the Khmu culture women are expected to participate in the household and community activities. However, this study found that there is no word for participation in the Khmu language. Neither is there a direct translation in Lao for those who seek to encourage participation. Women view their participation in the household and the community as making a contribution or sharing. But this does not include any expectation for them to be involved in decision making or leadership. This study found that similar roles such as cleaning and serving are adopted by women in development projects.

This research shows that Khmu women experience barriers to participation in project activities. The barriers include language; education; cultural norms; health issues; workload; resettlement; poverty; low self-esteem; staff and project approach; the village administrative structure; fewer opportunities with development projects; and limited formal access and control over assets. To overcome these barriers and to participate in development projects women would benefit from greater support.

The results of this study identified many roles that staff play when working with the community for example, teacher/trainer; learner; follower; advisor; demonstrator/role model and advocate. These roles each have different implications for women's participation. Where voluntary participation is not forthcoming, staff may use government power to encourage women's attendance. This study concludes that to empower women to overcome barriers themselves and participate more fully in community development requires both men and community to provide support and acceptance.

**Keywords:** Khmu, women, participation, development project, barriers, community, roles

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## **Abbreviations and Acronyms**

*Identification of interview participants are found in the coding system (Appendix I).*

ADP	Area Development Program
AusAID	Australian Agency for International Development
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CDW	Community Development Worker
CEDAW	Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
CIDA	Canadian International Development Agency
DFID	Department for International Development
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
GAD	Gender and development
GFWs	Gravity Fed Water Systems
GRID	Gender Resource Information & Development Centre
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organisation
Lao PDR	Lao People's Democratic Republic
LaoNCAW	Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women
LFNC	Lao Front for National Construction
LPRP	Lao People's Revolutionary Party
LWU	Lao Women's Union
LY	Lao Youth Union
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NAFRI	National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute
NGPES	National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy

NZAID	New Zealand's International Aid & Development Agency
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
TBA	Traditional Birth Attendants
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCAP	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (United Nations Children's Fund)
VDC	Village Development Committee
VHW	Village Health Worker
WAD	Women and Development
WCARRD	World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development
WID	Women in development
WVL	World Vision Laos



## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **1.1. Background**

I was born in a small poor village in Vientiane Province near the capital of Laos. I am from the Lao-Tai ethnic group and I speak Lao. My family, were rice farmers but when I was five years old my parents, younger sister and I moved to the capital. I went to a local school near my house. During school holidays I returned to the village to live with my grandma. Father was a teacher and mother sold vegetables at the market. After school and work we all had to help my mother at the market. As a teacher my father did not earn much. We were fortunate that my mother's market stall was doing well to feed the family. In 1996, the Lao University was established. I was one of the first batches of students to attend. While I studied I was also a member of the Lao Women's Union.

I wanted to study law but eventually chose to study English language instead. Knowing a foreign language gave me the opportunity to be able to connect with outside world through reading books and being able to communicate with foreigners. It also led World Vision Laos (WVL) to offer me a job as an Operations Assistant after my graduation. As a new employee I had no idea about development and participation. WVL gave me a lot of opportunities to learn and take new roles. It was a challenge for me because it meant more responsibilities and working with male colleagues. At that time WVL was small and there was no female staff in my team or among field staff. My job allowed me to visit project sites in the north of Laos.

The majority of the communities that WVL works with are Khmu. Visiting communities gave me an opportunity to interact with them. I met many women working very hard at home. However, when it came to the project activities such as meetings and trainings few women attended. Some women came but they were so shy, they hid at the back of the room and were busy with their children. I wondered why they did not get involved when the project was meant to benefit them. If the project does not benefit them then how successful would the development projects be in helping poor communities? How can the project improve the wellbeing of children if their mothers are not educated? WVL's



vision is focused on helping children. Educating girls brings benefit to the next generation and improves the well-being of children (Miller & Rodgers, 2009).

In 2008, the New Zealand's Agency for International Development (NZAID) offered me a scholarship to study a Master of Applied Science in International Rural Development at Lincoln University in New Zealand. Rural development is a priority area under NZAID Country Strategy (NZAID, 2006). The objective of the scholarship scheme is to *“enhance the skills, training and knowledge of selected individuals and thereby build capacity to contribute to the sustainable development of key areas in their home country”* (NZAID, n. d.). On completion of their studies, graduates return home to contribute to development (NZAID, 2010).

In New Zealand I also participated in activities including the New Zealand-Asia Young Leaders Conference. These opportunities gave me a better understanding of the world. I recognise how blessed I have been in my life. I also realised I am seen by people at home as a leader because many other women do not have the same opportunities. I wanted to explore this in my research. Part of my success is from learning English but in this I wanted to look at other issues in addition to language that prevent women's participation. The roles women play and the barriers they face to participate are the focus of my thesis. I wanted to contribute to the less privileged women I worked with previously in rural Laos.

## **1.2. Introduction to the research**

The history of development aid to Laos began around the 1950's (Phraxayavong, 2009). Development partners have put a lot of effort and resources (e.g. funding, technical skills, expertise and time) into community development. Much of this focuses on encouraging community participation. Today aid agencies work closely with Government agencies such as the LWU. Although there has been some improvement, women from ethnic groups including the Khmu in northern Laos remain difficult to reach. Khmu women show less interest in participating in development projects. Further investigation is

required into the barriers that prevented Khmu women's participation in development projects.

The Khmu in the north and the south are quite different in terms of language and their livelihoods. The focus of this study is the Khmu in northern Laos, who are more vulnerable than other groups due to geographical remoteness. Many development partners try to work with them (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2009). However, there is a lack of information related to the Khmu ethnic group. The Government of Lao People's Democratic Republic has recognised that *"it will not be able to realise the goals of reducing poverty and improving national education, health and population indicators without the active participation of all women, particularly poor and ethnic minority women"* (Lao PDR, 2002, p. 113). By improving the life of women we also help the rest of the community.

This study adopts an exploratory approach and the results are descriptive. My desire is that the research findings will provide a better understanding of why Khmu women do not participate by understanding their roles and barriers to participate. Development partners can use the research results to revise and improve their approach to working with this group so that such projects will benefit communities throughout Laos.

### **1.3. Aims and objectives**

The third Millennium Development Goal states that to achieve gender equality *"it is necessary to place women's empowerment at the centre of national development plans"* (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2010a). It is difficult to involve Khmu women in development plans when they do not show interest or participate in development activities. Investigating the roles and barriers Khmu women face in participating in development projects is important to help development partners work more effectively with these communities.

The aim of this study is to explore Khmu women's participation in community development projects in Luang Prabang Province, Laos PDR.

Research questions:

- ***Do women experience barriers to participating in project activities?***
  - a. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community?
  - b. What are the barriers for Khmu women to participate in the development project?
  - c. How do they overcome these barriers?
- ***What is the role of development partners and related government agencies in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects?***

#### **1.4. Structure of the Thesis**

The thesis, '*Women's participation in community development projects: the case of Khmu women in Laos*,' comprises of six Chapters:

*Chapter One* provides the background to the research and introduces the author's perspective, the research aims and objectives.

*Chapter Two* introduces Laos including the geography, people, and the Khmu ethnic group, the status of women, development and governance.

*Chapter Three* looks at participation and empowerment including the theory and practice of participation, and the perspectives of community, Government and development partners including World Vision Laos.

*Chapter Four* explains the research methodology, including qualitative research interviews, data analysis and the constraints of the study.

*Chapter Five* examines the results from two village case studies. It looks at the roles of both staff and women and how they understand participation in development projects. The barriers faced by women to participation are also identified.

*Chapter Six* provides a discussion on how people perceive participation and how this influences their action; the barriers women face to participating in development projects; and elaborates on the approaches staff use to improve women's participation.

*Chapter Seven* concludes the research with the main findings, recommendations and further research suggestions.

## **Chapter Two: Laos**

### **2.1. Introduction**

This Chapter introduces Laos and covers the geography and people, the Khmu ethnic group, the status of women, development and governance, including the Lao Women's Union (LWU) and development partners.

### **2.2. Geography**

Laos is a landlocked country in South East Asia covering more than 236,800 square kilometres (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade [MFAT], 2008). About 80 percent of the country is mountainous, especially in the north (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], 2010a). Only four percent of the land in Laos is suitable for agriculture and 80 percent of the population is involved in farming. Most farmers are engaged in subsistence agriculture (ASEAN-JAPAN Farmers' Partnership Project [ASEAN-JAPAN FAPP], 2008). There are three main plateaus found in the north, central and southern region of the country and floodplains extend from the north, where they are narrow, to the south where they are much wider. The Mekong River is the most important river. It runs through most of Laos and forms a large part of the western boundary with Thailand (Figure 1).

### **2.3. People**

Laos has a population of 5,609,000 giving it one of the lowest population densities in Asia with approximately 24 people per square kilometre (NZAID, 2009). The majority of the population is reported to live in rural areas and only 20 percent live in urban areas, including cities, towns and district centre's (NZAID, 2009). The limited availability of good quality agricultural land makes it difficult to improve productivity. In the Lao context, rural means poor and isolated with limited access to markets and services. Development is needed and research is required to make sure it is effective.

There are more than 49 ethnic groups in Laos which each have their own culture and traditions. These ethnic groups belong to four broad language families: The Lao-Tai, who are the majority; the Mon-Khmer; the Hmong-Mien; and the Chine-Tibet (Berkley Center, 2010). The poorest ethnic groups are found in mountainous areas. They are isolated and marginalized. Among these the Khmu (the Mon-Khmer) are the poorest, and most isolated. They are animist, while the majority of the Lao population is Buddhist. Further elaboration on this difference is provided in the results. These communities have limited access to markets and services. Health, sanitation, malnourishment, education services and poor infrastructure are persistent problems among this group. Therefore, they have an urgent need for development assistance. This is one of the reasons World Vision Laos has selected them as a target group for their development activities.



Figure 1. Lao Peoples Democratic Republic

Source: CIA (2010)

### 2.3.1. ***Khmu (ethnic group)***

The Khmu are the second largest ethnic group in Laos. According to the 2005 census, the population of Khmu makes up about 11 percent of total population (LNFC, 2005).

Although Khmu is the second largest ethnic group in Laos, they are also the poorest and account for 55% of people living in poverty (Bechstedt & Gilbos, 2007). The Lao Government defines poverty as “*the lack of ability to fulfil basic human needs such as not having enough food, lacking adequate clothing, not having permanent housing and lacking access to health, education and transportation services*” (Lao PDR, 2002, p. 4).

There are many dimensions of poverty. Some of these are described in ‘*The Geography of Poverty and Inequality in the Lao PDR*’ (Epprecht, Minot, Dewina, Messerli & Heinemann, 2008). The Government identified 47 poor districts in Laos. In this study poor households are identified as those having ‘*small, broken houses, isolated at the back of the village, lacking food, clothing, livestock, agriculture land and livelihood opportunities and in poor health*’.

The Khmu have a reputation of being least developed amongst other ethnic groups and are perceived by development workers as being a difficult group to cooperate with. It is important for development partners to understand this group, particularly the women and how to work with them effectively. Addressing the development needs of Khmu women is important to achieve the national goal of poverty alleviation by 2020 (Lao PDR, 2002). This makes this study very relevant to Government and development partners.

### 2.3.2. ***People and language***

Khmu people are identified by their language and culture, which also impacts their participation in wider society and socio-economic development. The Khmu are an indigenous group with Indochinese roots. They lived in Laos before others arrived and descend from the Mon-Khmer people group. The name Khmu means person (ຊົນ).

Simana & Preisig (1997) have written extensively on the group and are a leading authority in Laos. They report that in the old days Lao-Tai people called the Khmu by the name of Khoom (ຊຸມ) (which means below, down there or lower down) or Kha (ຂ້າ)

(meaning kill or slave). In the 14<sup>th</sup> century (during the reign of Cao FaNgum) the Khmu were called Kakao (ຂ້າວກ້າ) (which means old or original Kha). The use of these names in Lao society has led the Khmu people to feel disrespected. However, in 2008 the Lao Government reclassified ethnic groups. Officially Khmu will no longer be called Lao Thung, Kha or Lao Kang and other names, but will be called Khmu (Lao National Front for Construction [LNFC], 2009). Today Khmu refer to themselves as 'Km-hmu', 'Kwm-hmu', 'K-mu', or 'Kam-me' depending on the speakers' dialect (Simana & Preisig, 1997).

Lao is the official language used in Lao society. However Khmu use their own language for communication among themselves. The Khmu language belongs to the Plaugic-Khmuic branch of the Mon-Khmer family of languages. The two main regional subgroups are 'Khmu Ou' and 'Khmu Kloong'. These groups are distinguished by speech differences and regional distribution. However, each can understand the other's language. There have been several attempts to develop a written language for the Khmu, although it has proved difficult to find one system that represents all dialects equally well (Simana & Preisig, 1997). Language is one of the primary challenges development partners face working with Khmu communities.

### 2.3.3. *Legend and historical events*

The Khmu have a very long history and it shapes the way they see the world and their relationship with other people in society. One of the oldest legends passed on by elders for many generations is known as 'The Giant Gourd' (Maak nam tao pung), which relates to a great flood. This legend is common to people throughout Indochina. According to the legend, humans originated from 'The Giant Gourd'. They were born to a couple of siblings (the only surviving humans). The Khmu were the first group to come out of the giant gourd through a hole pierced by a glowing iron stick. This is why the Khmu have darker skin and were considered to be a brother of other groups. This legend is related to historical evidence and has shaped the way the Khmu people perceive creation (Simana & Preisig, 1997).



The historical and cultural relationship between the Tai-Lao and the Khmu people has changed over time. While the Lao feudal rulers reigned, the Khmu became disadvantaged. Throughout the history of Laos, the Khmu have lacked political power and had limited involvement in administration. They have also had limited participation in formal education and lagged behind in socio-economic development. Simana & Preisig (1997, p.10) state:

*Being hampered in their full development led to an attitude of 'not being one's own master', of self-denial, of lack of self-esteem, and of lack of responsibility towards self and society. The former regime of 'Chao Kuang Chao Laam' in which Lao feudals abused their power to exploit and rule over the Khmu' population, only intensified the Khmu's sentiments of shame, fearfulness, submission, self-denial, to the point of accepting being slaves of and in society.*

The way Khmu people see themselves, makes it difficult for them to participate in development and for development partners to understand and work effectively with them.

#### **2.3.4. *Cultures and beliefs***

Differences between the Khmu and other Lao people include a lack of motivation to participate in development projects. The Khmu have a very strong belief in animism (belief in spirits). The Khmu believe that there are two kinds of spirits. One stays in the village and other stays in the forest and woods. This belief plays a central role in Khmu livelihoods. Spirits also rule in the lives of plants and animals. Khmu believe spirits can help and harm people, and keep spirits happy by sacrificing animals to them. Khmu also have a particular way for doing agricultural work which is different from other ethnic groups. For example, they:

- Conduct a ceremony for the soil to help farmers in their agricultural work
- Are very careful not to damage any living thing in the fields to ensure the spirits do not curse the field for the next generation

- Pick certain days before and after farming and harvesting to kill chickens and make alcohol sacrifices to the spirits

Culture and beliefs are passed on from one generation to another (Simana & Preisig, 1997). The way of doing field work is still almost exactly the same as it used to be done in the distant past with only minor changes. The way of living and eating is still close to nature. When there is a drought or there is not enough rice, the Khmu have a strong belief that the spirits are not happy with them. To solve this problem, instead of seeking new technology to improve their land, the Khmu consult with the spirits by offering them a meal with sacrificed animals such as a pig or chickens (Simana and Preisig, 1997). They do not see development as a solution to their problems. This makes it difficult to encourage them to participate in development projects.

It is a belief among the Khmu that the knowledge that a person needs to live well in the community is not from school. In school the teachers talk about things that are not visible and cannot be touched. In the Khmu culture elders and parents also use proverbs and other sayings instead of using commands. Elders or village leaders are very important and respected people (Lewis, 1992). Only men can be shamans and ritual practitioners (Vang, 2005). Therefore, in practice Khmu culture and beliefs affect both women's perception and participation in the household, community and development projects. However, there has been limited research focusing on the relationship between these.

The Khmu culture and way of educating people is quite different from other groups. It can be a strong barrier to Khmu women participating in development activities because they may feel most activities are not relevant to their daily life. However, there has been limited research focusing on how to deliver knowledge to the Khmu women and encourage them to participate in development projects that fit with their culture, livelihoods and beliefs. This is the primary focus of this study.

### 2.3.5. *Livelihoods*

Livelihood possibilities are governed by geography. Often livelihoods are related to what can be grown and gathered. Today the Khmu still build their houses on low wooden stilts in the lower mountain regions. Traditional Khmu villages have populations of between 10 and 90 households (LNFC, 2005). Like most Lao people, the Khmu are traditionally swidden or ‘slash and burn’ subsistence farmers. They cultivate glutinous rice, maize, millet, sweet potatoes, tobacco, tea, peppers, cotton and many other different kinds of vegetables (Lewis, 1992). The Khmu people also depend on forest products, such as leaves, mushroom, bamboo shoots, fish and game (Simana & Preisig, 1997). Cultivating rice (glutinous rice) is significant to Khmu livelihoods for subsistence. In the Mekong region *“rice and its significance contributes towards the languages, religions and festivals”* (Tu, Geheb, Susumu & Vitoon, 2004, p. 3). Some villages produce baskets, wooden bowls and knives while others grow different kinds of sweet potatoes, taro and vegetables. In the past, small livestock such as pigs and chickens were raised for consumption and exchange (Lewis, 1992).

## 2.4. Status of women

The status of women is equally important to the participation of ethnic groups in development. Throughout the world, women have less opportunity to participate in development and in leadership roles (United Nations [UN], 2010). In many societies girls do not have the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge, and are not encouraged to develop the self-confidence needed for public life (Karl, 1995). The status of women is reflected in their leadership position (Table1). The Lao National Commission for the Advancement of Women [LaoNCAW] (2005) as cited in UNDP (2007) found that only 1.32 percent of Lao villages have women leaders.

Low levels of women participating at provincial level and below means that they have less power in decision making. Although higher levels of participation (8.10 percent of the total) are found for ministerial roles, this does not mean that women’s voices are

heard. Female ministers definitely participate in decision making but a lack of women's participation in the general population remains.

Table 1: Participation in political position (National/Village)

Positions	Total number of people	Number of females	Number of males	Percentage female	Percentage male
Minister and equivalent	37	3	34	8.10	91.90
Vice- minister and equivalent	67	3	64	4.48	95.52
Director of department and equivalent	416	37	379	8.90	91.10
Governor of province, capital and special zone	18	0	18	0	100
Vice-governor of province, capital an special zone	32	0	32	0	100
Head of provincial cabinet	18	1	17	5.56	94.44
Vice- head of provincial cabinet	55	0	55	0	100
Chief of district	141	3	138	2.13	97.87
Deputy chief of district	181	2	179	1.10	98.90
Head of district cabinet	141	0	141	0	100
Vice- head of district cabinet	213	2	211	0.94	99.06
Chief of village	10,944	145	10,799	1.32	98.68
Total	12,269	196	12,067	1.60	98.40

(Source: LaoNCAW, 2005 as cited in UNDP, 2007, p. 6)

Women today face many challenges including: fewer opportunities to participate in education; maternal health risks; and a lack of access to resources. They play important roles in the household and the community. However, in Khmu and other ethnic groups in upland areas, women may have low self-esteem about their ability to do something other than work in the household. A report by Karkas (1999) shows that many women in rural areas prefer not to have equal status with their husbands or men. From birth, women are considered as lower than men. This affects their status and control and ownership of resources. It also affects the way women see themselves and how development partners see them. Although there is a focus on women, it appears that their needs are not fully

addressed. Sometimes, development partners overlook the invisible power in household decision making that women have in favour of men's official roles (Gianotten, Groverman, Walsum & Zuidberg, 1994).

## **2.5. Development**

The Lao context and geography have always been a challenge for development of the country and people, especially ethnic groups and women in isolated rural areas (NZAID, 2006). The majority of the population depend on subsistence agriculture. Today the Lao economy depends on several industries for its survival including agriculture, handicrafts, fishing and small scale clothing manufacture. Agriculture accounts for 48 percent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and is dominated by rice production, particularly sticky rice (Gender Resource Information & Development Centre [GRID], 2005). In 1986, the New Economic Mechanism was established. The Lao Government made great efforts to improve and expand the economy. The goal was to reform the economic system and become more market oriented starting with the areas of agriculture, forestry, and services (Phengkhay, 1999). These changes brought Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in resource development. Laos' main domestic product is rice. Its main export products are tobacco, coffee, tin mining and timber. The country is also rich in forest and water resources, which have great potential for the country's development. Since the late 1990's tourism has boomed and the number of tourists has grown rapidly (Asianinfo, n.d.).

The estimated GDP per capita in Laos for 2010 was USD \$964 (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2010). This is a big improvement on previous years. However, not everyone benefits. It also does not reflect the situation in many rural areas. The development of rural infrastructure provides greater access to markets and services. It also brings social problems such as migration (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2009). Roberts & Rastogi (2006, p. 2) said *“improved access potentially increases men's migration, and may result to increased workload on women in the farm and household”*.

Development brings pressure on land and resources and requires reform for them to be managed well. Land and forest allocation reform were first introduced in Laos in 1990 and 1994. It became a nationwide policy with the Prime Minister's Decree No.186 (Baird & Shoemaker, 2005). It provides three main objectives of land allocation: 1) to stop deforestation which results from slash and burn cultivation; 2) to intensify agricultural production; and 3) to improve the Government revenue base through land taxation. The primary targets of the new land allocation procedures are the ethnic groups living in mountainous and remote areas. These people account for 40 percent of the total population (FAO, 2004). Related to this is the Government's policy on resettlement which is justified under the goal of poverty alleviation and rural development. The Lao Government's motivation for resettlement is divided into five categories: 1) eradication or reduction of swidden /shifting cultivation/slash-and-burn agriculture; 2) opium eradication; 3) security concerns; 4) access and service delivery; and 5) cultural integration and nation building (Baird & Shoemaker, 2005). Alternative livelihoods must be found for those affected by this policy. Furthermore, Baird, & Shoemaker (2005) identify three components to resettlement in Laos:

1. Focal Sites (khet chout xoum): where local Government concentrate on a large number of ethnic groups being moved to a selected Site. The site is selected by the local Government or development input is provided to certain community.
2. Village Consolidation (tao hom ban) and (chat san ban kong thi): Involves combining smaller scattered smaller villages by resettling people into larger permanent villages.
3. Land and Forest Allocation (beng din beng pa): With the objective of developing a system of land classification according to use; improve natural resources management; prevent illegal logging; and provide villagers with new management and use rights

Although resettlement is meant to bring benefits, for example better services with regard to health, education and improved road infrastructure (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004), it is often poor ethnic groups, women and children who continue to suffer. Resettlement disrupts food production, other livelihood activities, social structures, and the whole

traditional way of life. In a recent survey in Luang Namtha there was an increase in mortality rates in villages that had recently been relocated. The number of deaths was four per 100 in the relocated population compared with an average rate of 2.32 in upland villages and 0.78 in lowland villages (ADB, 2004).

Laos is ranked 133 on the Human Development Index (HDI) of 182 countries according to the 2009 Global Human Development Report (UNDP, 2010b). The Lao Government aims to achieve the goal of poverty alleviation by 2020 (Lao PDR, 2002). The Government is under pressure to achieve the goals and may overlook women's issues and participation in the process of development because these are not their primary focus.

## **2.6. Governance**

The Government has the primary role in governance from national down to local level. Since 1975, Lao PDR has been governed by one party, the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (LPRP) (UN, 2005). Under the 1991 constitution, LPRP has the authority to make national policy. The President is the head of state and is elected by the National Assembly. The executive is led by the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers (Laos Cultural Profile, 2008). Laos is divided into 16 provinces plus a Special Zone. Vientiane is the capital of Laos. The provinces are divided into many districts. In practice, districts are also divided into many villages. In addition, the district administration tends to group villages into zones which are made up of several villages (UN, 2005). Good governance is important to ensure participation and the sustainable development of resources. The Government's approach to rural development is outlined in the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES). The rural poor are the priority in the NGPES, *"the Government places a great deal of emphasis on enabling the rural poor to attack their own poverty"* (Lao PDR, 2002, p. 9).

The NGPES outlines a strategic approach to rural poverty eradication. It has two components a) improving access and b) poverty-focused planning. Improving access concerns accessibility to five components shown in Figure 2. They include: Social

Services; Human Resources; Rural Finance and Capital; Markets; and Sustainable Technology (Lao PDR, 2002). This approach is similar to the Sustainable Livelihood Framework of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD, n.d.), which includes human (H), natural (N), financial (F), physical (P) and social (S) capital. Although the NGPES does not identify social capital specifically, it does refer to Human Resource Development and People's Participation as being central to the strategy. The Department for International Development (DFID) (1999) explains how the relationship between different forms of capital helps us understand the livelihoods of poor people. For example, owning livestock (physical capital P) may also contribute to social (S) capital. Serrat (2008) points out that the framework draws on the main factors that affect the livelihoods of the poor and can be used in planning and prioritising new development activities.

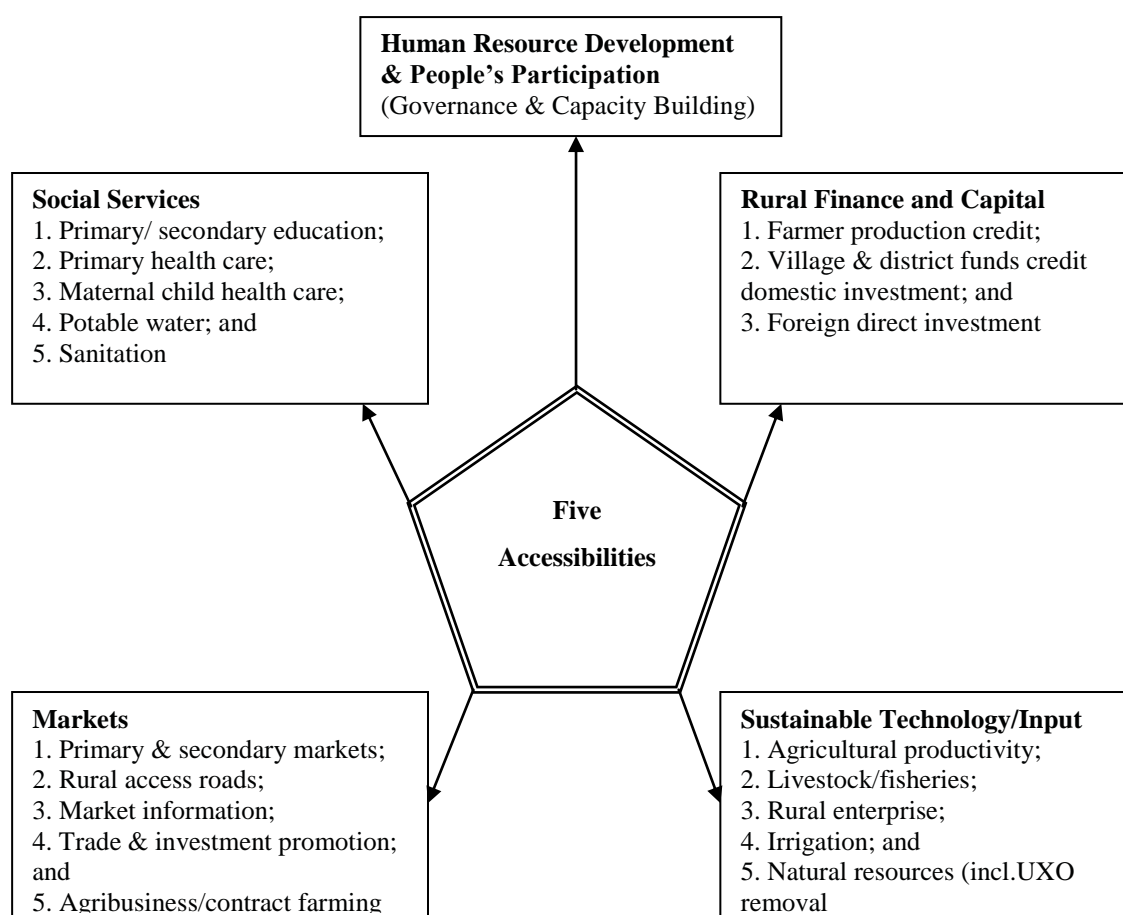


Figure 2: Strategic approach to rural poverty eradication

Source: Redrawn from Lao PDR (2002)



Gender is crucial in influencing livelihood outcomes. For example, gender differences exist in access to credit and resources. Often land is owned by men. Women have limited formal access to land which means little collateral for taking credit (Arun, Heeks & Morgan, 2004). However, the Lao Government's strategic approach to rural poverty eradication does not seem to address gender and ethnicity issues directly. This is a key observation given the importance of participation of these groups in rural development.

#### 2.6.1. *Lao Women's Union (LWU)*

In many developing countries civil society organisations address the issues of women and ethnic groups' and formalize their participation. In Laos the Lao Women's Union (LWU), often addresses women's issues and the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) addresses ethnicity. They play similar roles to civil society organisations elsewhere. These mass organisations have representatives at all levels (national, provincial, district and village). The LWU is active in rural areas, working with women in all ethnic groups. It is often involved in health programs and encourages income generating activities (UN, 2005). As the official Government agency responsible for improving women's status, they are also the key partner for NGOs to implement development projects aiming at gender empowerment.

The LWU was founded in 1955 and officially recognised in 1991 under the Constitution of Laos. The organisation contributes directly to "*preserve, protect and extend the good culture, custom of the nation especially of the women*" (LWU, 2007, p. 4). The Union is also responsible for setting up and the implementation of their three part motto "*Be good citizen, develop yourself well and protect your family and culture well*". This motto is to develop women's quality of life step by step (Karkas, 1999, p. 14). It is intended to promote women's role in society and bring about gender equality.

The LWU is an organisation that represents the advancement of women and children of all ethnic groups (LaoNCAW, 2005). The LWU's roles are as follows:

- To encourage and monitor the implementation of party policy, the constitution, and laws which relate to the benefit and advancement of women and children;
- To ensure the solidarity and harmony of the country; and
- To train all ethnic women to understand the new policy of the party, constitution and state laws.

The LWU also organises and implements women's development projects in rural areas. The major of project activities include vocational training, establishing credit and micro finance, weaving, agriculture, income generation and small and medium business development. In total there are eight projects that cover every province, and include 523 villages in 51 districts (LaoNCAW, 2005). Lao women do participate in these activities but they do not participate in management, decision making and politics (Gender Resource Information & Development Centre [GRID], 2005). In addition, the LWU has a significant role in encouraging women to participate in decision making at all levels and advocates for women's rights under the law. The LWU operates throughout the country at all levels and has a vertical administrative structure that extends down to the grassroots level (LWU, 2007).

#### 2.6.2. *Development partners*

The core focus for development partners is to improve the livelihoods of poor and marginalized groups. International donors make a significant contribution to the Lao economy. Laos received total aid assistance in 2001 of US\$ 243 million, which is equivalent to about 40percent of Lao GDP. The largest bilateral donor is Japan, followed by China which provides large amounts of aid and other development assistance to Laos (Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 2007). International Governmental and Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO), such as United Nations Agencies and World Vision have an important role in providing development assistance (Daravong, 2006). These organisations support projects across a broad range of sectors such as agriculture, forestry & fisheries, emergency/humanitarian relief, community development, education, health

care, income generation & economic development, social development and human resources development (Shah, 2005).

There is a lack of capacity in existing Government structures to provide support for rural development. International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO), are key development partners in Laos. The ADB (2005, p. 2) reports that the *“INGOs have been able to work at the grassroots level in remote areas where the Government and larger multilateral organisations have difficulty providing assistance”*. This means INGOs play a role in governance as well. For example, World Vision Laos provides assistance to Government agencies such as the LWU. In development, it is important to ensure that local people can participate in decision making and activities so that they are involved in development. This requires local and central objectives to be harmonised because they are different. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (2008, p. 6) states *“work together to reduce the number of separate, duplicative, missions to the field and diagnostic reviews; and promote joint training to share lessons learnt and build a community of practice”*. In Laos, there are various groups such as Government and donors working in many sectors. The development partners’ activities must be in line not only with the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) but also with the NGPES. Development partners have an influence on how aid is governed and who is able to participate in projects. This involves a lot of money and people.

Development partners, like World Vision Laos, have a gender policy. It is designed to safeguard women especially rural ethnic groups. However, in a country like Laos that has a diverse population it is difficult to have a policy that applies to all contexts. The poor rural women that development partners want to help may be disadvantaged by formal policies. For example, in the case of resettlement *“internal resettlement and related initiatives in Laos are, in many cases, having a major and generally negative impact on the social systems, livelihoods and cultures of many indigenous ethnic communities and people”* (Baird & Shoemaker, 2005, p. 2). The literature shows that women are important in development but there is no policy to address the specific issues of Khmu women. This

study focuses on participation, how the community and development partners see and address the issues.

## **2.7. Conclusion**

Development in Laos is constrained by its landlocked and mountainous geography. The majority of the Lao population depend on subsistence agriculture. Laos is ethnically diverse and many groups live in rural areas. These factors slow down the progress of development. In addition, Khmu people are the second largest ethnic group in Laos and they are also the poorest. To streamline the development process, the Lao Government has prepared the NGPES that includes direction on how the LWU and development partners can contribute to improving women's participation in development.

## Chapter Three: Participation and Empowerment

### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter looks at participation and empowerment. In addition to its theoretical background and its interpretation, perspectives of different stakeholders are discussed. These include the community, government and development partners including World Vision Laos.

### 3.2. Theory and practice

In English the term ‘*participation*’ is defined as “*the fact or condition of sharing in common (with others, or with each other); partnership, fellowship; profit-sharing*” (OED, 1973, p. 1518). Participation in rural development was formalised in the mid 1970s. The planning paradigms of the 1960s and 1970s had developed from the colonial period when there was a top-down approach to development. However, often these approaches were not successful in rural development and poverty alleviation because there was little participation of local people in development projects (UNESCAP, 2009). In early development approaches the role of women in their communities was ignored. They were not included in program design and implementation (Australian Agency for International Development [AusAID], 1997). Today everyone has a right to participate. The 1979 World Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (WCARRD), formed the ‘*Peasants Charter*’ that states that the rural poor “*must be permitted to participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of rural development programs*” (FAO, 1981). Including everyone in the community in the development process remains a challenge for development partners.

People have a right to development which includes participation under the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCR, 2010).

*The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political*

*development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised.*

However, there are many different definitions and practices of participation as Chambers (2005, p. 104) highlights:

*Participation has no final meaning. It is not a rock. It is mobile and malleable, an amoeba, a sculptor's clay, a plasticine shaped as it passes from hand to hand and perhaps it is right that this should be so, and that each generation, each group, each person should puzzle out what they think it should mean and how they can best give it expression.*

Participation is different in different contexts. This is important for development partners to understand. However, there has been limited research on the participation of Khmu people and their perceptions of the development process. Overall Participation should not be the goal of development partners. Often participation is the focus of development projects at the expense of overall project goals, such as poverty alleviation. This is one area explored in this study.

In contrast, to ensure community participation in development projects, both tangible and intangible issues are equally important. For example, to develop a community requires skill and knowledge in planning. However, in many development projects, tangible results (technological, financial, physical and material) are perceived as more important to success than intangibles such as training and capacity building activities. This is because the tangible benefits are easier to evaluate (Botes & Rensburg, 2000), and accepted more easily by the community.

Participation is understood as a 'good thing'. However, the interpretation of the meaning of participation and the form of practice is diverse. For example, consultants, academics, developing country Governments, NGOs, bilateral donors and international organisations

choose different approaches, principles, methods depending on their own mission and interests (UNESCAP, 2009). For example, Botes & Rensburg (2000) critique the problems of participatory approaches used by different development partners and the benefits and problems of Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) and Rapid Resource Appraisal (RRA). In Laos, Boas (1999, p. 10) suggests that successful partnerships with Lao people are often based on “*trust, equality, and mutual understanding and obligations*”. This study investigates how development partners work in partnership with the Khmu communities. Partnership is one of the understood meanings of participation.

Karl (1995) observes that participation usually has two dimensions: quantitative and qualitative. For example, quantitative measures look at how many people were affected by the project. This is one of the standards used to measure the success of development projects. However, it does not tell us if participants really benefit. Qualitative measures tell us the quality of participation. For example, when women participate in an activity, they have access to make decisions, to be involved in leadership and bring about change.

Chambers (2005) suggests participation occurs on four levels:

1. Information sharing: People are informed so that collective individual action can be facilitated;
2. Consultation: People are consulted and interact with an agency so that they provide feedback;
3. Decision making: People have a decision making role on specific issues which they do on their own, or joint decision making with other people; and
4. Initiating action: people are proactive and able to take initiative on a certain issue or project activity.

Many international development partners believe that participation creates opportunities for all community members to contribute to and influence the development process. It also encourages a sense of belonging and community integration (Midgley, 1986). However, Avorn (1996) suggests that participation cannot take place if participants are

not fully involved in decision making. Participants must be decision makers for the desired change to be achieved. Dudley (1993) argues that where the community is not involved in decision making, it is a passive collaborator in an outsider's intervention. It should be called community contribution instead. He also believes *"it is a myth to assume that everybody wants to be actively involved in decision making"* (Dudley, 1993, p. 160). In the Lao context it may be unrealistic to expect everyone in the community to be actively involved in decision making for each project. In the hierarchical structure of Lao society, not everyone is allowed to make decisions. Boas (1999, p. 23) reports that *"decision making is normally centralized among a few with little, if any, downward delegation of authority. Lao people prefer an authoritative leader who is considerate, capable, and who provides clear-cut directions"*. If people make decision before their leaders, they are considered as being aggressive and challenging authority which can lead to serious and harmful consequences. This is not recognised in policy on participation and may result in a greater burden for women and vulnerable groups in the community if they are forced to participate. This study investigates how to include Khmu women in decision making.

There are many barriers to participation found in many different areas from institutional to socio-cultural, technical and logistical (Botes & Rensburg, 2000). These obstacles depend on the context and exist inside and outside community. Internally they are found in conflicts between local people over their interest. Externally they are found in the role of development professionals and Government policy on promoting participation. They may also be found in a combination of both. In addition the community may not be willing to participate as a result of past experiences of participation where their expectations were not fulfilled (Botes & Rensburg, 2000).

Even though genuine participation is not easily achieved, people will participate under the right conditions (IFE, 2002). Firstly, people will participate when they feel the topic is important and relevant to them; secondly people have to believe that their actions count and make a difference; thirdly, all forms of participation such as cooking, playing sport and child care are acknowledged and valued and taken into account; fourthly, people must



be built up and supported in their participation; and finally, the structure and processes of participation must not make people feel uncomfortable (IFE, 2002).

Although community participation as a concept seems to be overused in the developed world, developing countries have a limited understanding of this concept (Botes & Rensburg, 2000). Chambers (1997) suggests participation is used in three ways:

1. Cosmetic Label which makes things look good. Usually donor agencies and Government demand a participatory approach;
2. Cooperation where participation gathers the local labour force and reduces costs. In this case, the community contribute their time and efforts to support the project with some outside assistance; and
3. Empowering Process which enhances local people so that they are able to take part in analysis of their own situation, make decisions, be confident and take initiative.

In a patriarchal and underdeveloped society, women are most disadvantaged. Therefore different approaches to women's participation have been introduced. Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) were introduced in the 1970s. WID has its main focus on women. It was based on the belief that gender roles will change as women have an equal role to men in education, development, employment and health services (Ramji, 1997). Active women's participation is needed for efficient and effective development (AusAID, 1997). WAD emphasises the importance of social class and the exploitation of the 'third world'. It assumes institutions need to be changed to increase women's participation (Ramji, 1997). However, the approach does not question women's subordination and the low value placed on what women do inside the home (Chitthathalath, 2006).

Then, in the mid 1980s, Gender and Development (GAD) was introduced to meet the requirements of sustainable development. The GAD approach recognises that to improve the status of women is not just a women's issue but also requires active participation of

men (AusAID, 1997). To alleviate poverty, promote development and achieve gender equality, requires women's empowerment by increasing access to economic resources, education, information and communication technology and governance including the protection of women's human rights (UNESCAP, 2010).

### 3.2.1. *Participation and empowerment*

The National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute (NAFRI) (2005, p. 43) says empowerment *"is about women or men developing their ability to: collectively and individually take control over their own lives; identify their needs and agendas; [and] demand support from their communities and the state to see that their interests are responded to"*. A practical example in international development comes from Barefoot College (n.d.) training program in India. The approach focuses on *"a holistic development of women by empowering them financially, socially as well as politically"*. An important part of the approach is generating employment within villages and providing them with access to education, vocational training and health care. The literature generally focuses on women's empowerment rather than that of men. This is because men already have power and *"the empowerment of women requires change in the division of labour and transformation of society"* (NAFRI, 2005, p. 43).

World Vision Laos (WVL) has a National Gender and Development Strategy 2008-2012. The goal is to *"implement policies and practices that promote equal opportunities for females and males within the World Vision organisation, field programs and projects"* (WVL, 2007a, p. 6). WVL believes that *"the effective participation of women, especially poor and ethnic minority women, is essential for the country to achieve the goals of reducing poverty and improving living standards"*, (WVL, 2007a, p. 9). WVL facilitates a meaningful culture and appropriate participation to address women's issue. This is done by providing women and girls with the opportunity to have equal roles and responsibilities as men and boys, in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development activities in their community. This is similar to the Government and Peasant Charter's reference to participation. The indicators of women's

participation are inputs of women/girls to the project during the assessment, design and planning of the village. Moreover, women's perception of the level of participation and percentage of women in key decision making position are the indicators monitored throughout the different stages of the project cycle (WVL, 2007a).

To promote equal participation in the development process, WVL (2007a, p. 9) will:

- *Strengthen gender participation and planning during the project assessment and design phase;*
- *Encourage women's participation as much as possible by selecting topics of interest to women;*
- *Increase direct communication with women from ethnic group by communicating in ethnic language wherever possible;*
- *Increase participation of women in community decision making processes; and*
- *Respect women's time for obligation to family and household commitments.*

Although there is policy and legislation in place to improve participation, it appears that current approaches are not sufficient for women to overcome the barriers they face. In the context of Laos, different agents are involved in community development including the community, Government and development partners. Therefore, it is important to understand how each group sees participation. However, there has been limited research that addresses the different perspectives and roles particularly among isolated Khmu communities, who share a different language and culture. The lack of information on this group among development partners makes it difficult to plan and implement activities. This study investigates each stakeholder's perspective on participation and the role they play in development process. It also raises wider questions over how the participation of women is viewed and evaluated by development partners.

### **3.3. Community Perspectives on Participation**

This Section explores community perspectives of women's participation in the community including household, cultural and social, subsistence agriculture, economic, access, control and ownership of resources, education, health, political and development.

#### **3.3.1. *Household***

Lao women are primarily responsible for household chores such as cooking, cleaning and caring which are necessary for survival. One study noted that for the Khmu, domestic work such as cooking, household maintenance, water carrying, forest gathering, and care of small domestic animals are the responsibility of women and girls (FAO 1998). Men's responsibilities are outside the household. Within the house women are responsible for food, children, parents and money. When a Khmu woman marries she has to move in with her husband's family. Her job is to carry the burden at home and work hard so that her parents in law will have favour on her (LWU, 2002).

Women's responsibilities mean they have to make decisions on daily finances. Gianotten *et al.* (1994) agrees that women traditionally have greater control over daily financial matters to meet basic needs such as food, education and health care than men do.

However, men provide direction and appear to have the final say. When a women's role is not recognised, women do not have influence. This is consistent with the Lao context.

Women spend more time on housework (2.5 hour per day) compared to men (0.6 hour per day) (GRID, 2005). Their role in agricultural production increases women's work load (Luangkhot & Gebert, 2007). This leaves women less time to participate in other activities in the outside world. Although it seems clear that women do make decisions on household management, in production activities, women's power in decision making is different in different cultures (Phengkhay, 1999). It is important to understand the Khmu cultural perspective of participation to empower women.

### 3.3.2. *Cultural and social*

Culture and social participation happen within the community. Women's participation tends to relate to household responsibilities such as washing clothes at the river together. Hand weaving is a traditional occupation of Lao women particularly the Lao-Tai ethnic group (GRID, 2005). Women also prepare food for funerals and weddings. These responsibilities are important for the community. They bring people together socially in an informal setting. Many social activities rely on women's participation to be organised. However, Khmu women's contribution can be seen only in preparing food and making sure that men have enough (Simana & Preisig, 1997). Cultural and social participation is an accepted part of life; therefore there are few barriers to participation.

### 3.3.3. *Subsistence agriculture and gathering*

The main form of subsistence is agriculture and gathering food from the forest and around the community. Traditionally, men and women have different but significant roles in agriculture. Around 70 percent of all women are involved in agriculture (Sihanath, Baken & Dyg (2004). A study by FAO (1998, Section 7), found that "*in rural areas women work two hours per day more than men*". Furthermore, women and girls carried out 50-70 percent of all household consumption and production activities and obtain their families dietary and household needs.

Women are involved in land preparation, irrigation and preparing bunds and seedbeds. Men on the other hand are involved more in irrigation, heavy cultivation, guarding fields and hunting wild animals (FAO, n.d.). In rural areas, girls often have the responsibility for grazing and watching the goats. Men and older boys, on the other hand, are primarily responsible for care of buffalo and oxen, hunting and fishing (FAO, 1998). For upland rice farming, both men and women are involved in all activities. However, there are some activities in which women are involved more than men and vice-versa. Table 2 shows that men are involved in activities such as making fences and burning, which may affect relationships outside the household. However, women spend more time weeding, which involves less risk and responsibility outside the household (Phengkhay, 1999).

Table 2: Activity profile upland rice

No.	Activities	Men	Women
1	Land preparation	+	+
2	Slash; clearing	+	+
3	Burning	+	-
4	Re-clearing	+	+
5	Make fence	++	+
6	Seeding	+	+
7	1st Weeding	+	+
	2nd Weeding	+	++
	3rd Weeding	+	++
	4th Weeding	+	+
8	Harvesting	+	+
9	Threshing	+	+
10	Transporting and Storing	+	+

Standard involvement and intensive involvement: + doing the activity ++ doing activity a lot

Source: Phengkhai (1999, p. 42)

Research by FAO (1998) indicated that the gender division of labour tends to be more rigid among midland and upland ethnic groups. The study found that gender divisions among the Khmu had not changed while other groups had changed. This study did not examine the reasons that made this group different from others. An FAO (n.d.) study suspects it could be because of the lower status of this group. Further research may reveal why the roles of men and women have not changed and improve our understanding of Khmu women's workload. This study does look at different households and identifies the barriers to women's participation. This study provides insights as to why Khmu society is so rigid and has not changed.

#### 3.3.4. *Economic*

Lao women's economic participation tends to relate to subsistence and household activities. Traditionally communities rely on exchange and sharing food but as markets

develop there are more economic opportunities (Lewis, 1992). Although Lao women's economic participation is high, they appear to do more unpaid family work which contributes to livelihood security. For example, women collect food which contributes to 40-60 percent of upland household's income in very poor and remote areas (GRID, 2005). In this context women are economically dependent on men. Women are seldom considered as the primary farmers even though they do most work. Women spend 4.5 hours per day on income generating work but it may not be recognised or valued (GRID, 2005).

In addition, women are also involved in trading and small businesses in the informal sector, which is considered a secondary job for women. For example, women on average spend 0.5 hours a day more on trading compared to men and 0.1 hour on handicrafts such as weaving and sewing (GRID, 2005). In rural areas handicrafts generate a significant amount of household cash income. Today livestock such as pigs, cows and chickens are a source of cash income for most villages (Green Discovery, 2009). Women play an important role in trading produce and would benefit from training in this area.

In Lao households a microfinance study found that the higher the expenses in an economic decision, the lower the woman's right to make the decision (Karkas, 1999). Women also have difficulty gaining access to financial resources. In African rural areas micro credit is often available as part of livelihood development programs. However, these credit schemes are not accessible to many women. This is because many women in rural areas lack information, the necessary skills, knowledge and relevant education and experience (Ngoze, 2006). A study in Nicaragua demonstrated that most often it is the men who sign the contract for credit and the women who then become responsible for repayment. If the family fails to pay, often they have to sell their livestock. In most cases women are not consulted when taking the loan in the first place (Pena, Maigues & Castillo, 2008). Furthermore, micro credit in rural Laos is considered a formal activity; therefore, it has become men's responsibility. The loan is given to the household not the individual, so as head of the family, men represent the family in the committee meeting and take the loan (GRID, 2005).

### 3.3.5. *Access, control and ownership of the resources*

The International Land Coalition (2010) states that *“women’s lack of access to and control over land is a key factor contributing to their poverty, with devastating results for households and communities, and thus needs to be addressed if poverty and hunger are to be reduced”*. They argue that the two key reasons for promoting women’s access to land include: (a) *“women’s rights as human rights are violated”*; and (b) *“women’s key role in ensuring food security and sustainable natural resource management is not sufficiently recognized”*. Women’s daily participation in the household, community and livelihood activities provide an opportunity for access to resources. However, Khmu women cannot work far from home or at night which restricts their participation (LWU, 2002). In day to day life women are responsible for many resources and making decisions on livelihoods. Land is a major resource for rural people.

Under the National Law, both men and women have equal access to land. However, many ethnic groups have strong customary practices regarding inheritance (GRID, 2005). The Lao-Tai ethnic group practice is ‘matrilineal’ inheritance. The daughter inherits or receives property from the parents. Then often women have more control over land. However, it is up to the parents to decide how much they give to each child. It is customary that the youngest daughter takes care of parents in their old age and inherits the family land after she is married. Khmu on the other hand, practice ‘patrilineal’ inheritance, where the family name and inheritance are transferred from father to son. In this case a woman often moves to her husband’s house and does not inherit land from her parents. Although under the Lao land law, all Lao women have right to access and own property, for many Khmu women access to land and productive resources is obtained indirectly through their husbands or male relatives (ADB, 2004).

Women’s limited access to resources is reflected in the preparation of land titles. About 58 percent of land was registered under the husbands’ name. Only 16 percent of land was registered under the wives’ name even though 40 percent of land was from her inheritance (FAO, 2010b). There have been many development projects and reforms to



provide men and women equal property rights. However, often both agree that the name of the head of the family should be on the land title which is mostly men. In rural areas, men's customary role is very important. This role is necessary both in practical terms and for ceremonial purposes. Luangkhot & Mann (2008, p. 30) highlight that *“men have power over women's access to use land resources through their control over mediation with the spirit world which regulates when and how land is used”*. This official role reflects their leadership status.

### 3.3.6. **Education**

Education provides an opportunity for women to participate in a more formal setting. Local resources describe education as a way to improve people's livelihoods and to facilitate the development process (Prime Minister Office, 2010). Access to education helps people to help themselves, their family and the community. Education provides the opportunity to access information and participate in development activities. However, women's access to education is limited, especially among ethnic groups in isolated areas.

The Human Development Index 2009, reports the literacy rate for the age group 15 years and older as 72.7 percent in 2005 (UNDP, 2009). However 'basic functional literacy' in 2001 was considerably lower at 45 percent (male: 54, female: 37) (Ministry of Education, 2008). The rate in Luang Prabang Province is also lower than the national average. UNDP (2001) reports the local figure for Mon-Khmer (Khmu) at 52.5 percent (male: 69, female: 36.8). The school enrolment rate is different across different ethnic groups. For example in rural areas female Mon-Khmer (Khmu), has a school enrolment of 57.4 percent and Lao-Tai 80.7 percent. Most of the Khmu live in remote areas where there is no school or poor access. It is a belief among Khmu that the first education they need is not from school because *“in school the teachers talk about things that are not visible and cannot be touched”* (Lewis, 1992, p. 51). This can be a challenge for development partners who wish to empower women by promoting education because Khmu have a lack of enthusiasm for education. Primary education is compulsory in Laos, but enforcement is difficult in rural areas.

Poverty is one of the main reasons that limit girls' opportunities to participate in education. Traditionally girls have to help their mothers to work the farm as well as doing the housework, looking after the younger siblings, collecting firewood, water and food from the forest, cooking, cleaning and feeding animals (ADB, 2004). Another reason is the lack of resources and awareness of parents regarding girl's education. Parents cannot afford clothing and school supplies and the school is far from the village. Many parents are not comfortable allowing their daughters walk a long distance to school. Lao is the official language and it is taught in school over all Laos. Many ethnic girls, who do not speak the Lao language, are also faced with language barriers in school (ADB, 2004). Kaufmann (2007) found that the lack of formal education and/or not being able to speak, read or write Lao constrains Khmu people from participating in economic and development processes. For example, people would not be able to participate adequately in business and trade and make use of social services around them. In addition, many parents still believe that girls are not worth educating because they will drop school to get married and leave home. However, this attitude has changed in many communities due to the Government and external agencies efforts to improve girls' attendance in primary school in recent years (ADB, 2004).

### 3.3.7. *Health*

Lao women are primarily responsible for the health care of the family particularly for their children. However, often their status in the household and community prevents access to public services. In 2005, the under-five mortality rate was 98 per 1,000 live births, and the infant mortality rate was 70 per 1,000 live births (UNDP, 2008). Most of the child deaths in Laos were caused by neonatal conditions and communicable diseases, in particular malaria, acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea and epidemics such as dengue fever, measles or meningitis (UNDP, 2008). In addition women are also faced with their own health issues, in particular maternal mortality. The maternal mortality rate in Laos is still high. In 2005 the rate was 405 deaths per 100,000 live births (UNDP, 2008). This was caused by the strenuous work, frequency of pregnancies, anaemia and poor nutrition, malaria and inadequate health services especially in rural areas. Women also have a lack of awareness of health and sanitation which affects the health of children. Furthermore, for rural women, language and cultural barriers prevent them from seeking help from

health services. Many rural communities still practice food taboos or cultural restrictions which harm the health of women and their children (ADB, 2004).

### 3.3.8. *Political*

Political participation in the village is related to culture and tradition. As for inheritance, the way politics is done is passed on from generation to generation. Most of the household representatives are men. In practice, this may exclude women from making decisions in public. The result is that women have little power in public and make no significant decisions regarding their life and the welfare of the community (Gianotten et al, 1994). In public meetings men dominate all decision making. FAO (1998, Section 8) states that “*men generally speak for the household and are elected or seconded to positions of authority within village social and political organisations*”. Women are not involved in political leadership in the village structure, and rarely consulted on political matters related to the community (Social Development Consultants, n.d.)

Throughout the history of Laos, the Khmu have lacked political power. They have not been involved in administration and had little education. The reputation of being least developed amongst other ethnic groups made the Khmu people have low self-esteem about themselves. However, no study has been done looking at how Khmu women see themselves to assist them in building equality with men and other ethnic groups. This is one of the significant aspects of this study. The findings will help development projects to build up the Khmu’s capacity and increase their confidence. Having good self confidence is important for participation because when people believe in themselves and accept themselves they can contribute more (Naik, 1998).

In the Lao context, men are the public face of the household. They are seen as leaders and expected to deal with political matters (Social Development Consultants, n.d.). For the community the village headman is the leader in political matters. In a small community they are not willing to change the political structure or the way women participate in public. The system is stable and acceptable. The policies of Government and development

partners towards women can only be effective if they are accepted by both men and women in the community. However, the relationships seen in development practice today do not appear to have addressed this issue. Women continue to be disadvantaged.

### 3.3.9. *Development*

International rural development projects are rarely initiated by the community. In Laos, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) like World Vision Laos (WVL) will ask the Government for access to the community. The choice of which communities participate in WVL's projects comes from the Government and from the interests of the organisation. The community does not participate in initial project planning or the selection of their community for the project. For example, in voluntary resettlement programs *"the Khmu also wanted to establish a school, but the Government refused to provide a teacher unless the Khmu moved in with the Lao"* (Baird & Shoemaker, 2005, p. 30). Although Khmu have often been dismissed by society because of their traditional values, in this case the community is requesting a school which would support development goals. However, this development has conditions attached to it and is clearly not voluntary. Men have the authority and responsibility for development in the community. This explains why the outcome of many projects, serve men more than women. For example, women do appreciate many development projects taking place in their communities, such as building roads for access and electricity supplies. However, these schemes require contributions from each household and therefore women do not see them as a priority for their household finances. Women feel like they have to follow the decisions being made by the committee which includes elders, the village head man and Buddhist monks (FAO 1998). These people are selected based on cultural beliefs and social conventions which are difficult for people to question publicly. Often women do not have any input in meetings and do not know when decisions are made. An FAO (1998) study found that rural women in Laos tend to listen to men's suggestion and decisions for everything including their roles and responsibilities. For this reason women's priorities are overlooked which could constrain them from being actively involved in development activities.

Lao women exercise their participation in economic, social and politic arenas under the 1999 constitution, national laws and policies. Their interests are also addressed by

international treaties such as the ‘Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women’ (CEDAW) (ADB, 2004). However, ethnic women do not participate in development projects very often. The lack of decision making power among Khmu women could be a reason why they do not actively participate in development projects. However, Khmu women do make decisions in some aspects of household chores. Previous studies have not considered how these relate to development activities and what barriers remain. Although Laos does have laws and institutions that encourage women to be involved in all activities, women still face challenges to participate in community development projects. These areas require further investigation to improve development partners approach and empower Khmu women to participate in development projects.

The Khmu also have lagged behind in socio-economic development. It appears that the economy is a priority when development comes. Women’s development and education is seen as less important. For example, for the Route 3 development ADB (2009, p. 3) report that *“a major outcome of the road’s presence, therefore, is willingness of villagers both local and from further afield, to embrace new pursuits as they increasingly engage in a market economy”*. This may be reflected in their attitude to and involvement in development. The reputation of being least developed amongst other ethnic groups made the Khmu people have low self esteem about themselves. For this reason more study is needed to understand how Khmu see themselves, how to assist them and build equality with other ethnic groups.

### **3.4. Government**

#### **3.4.1. *Lao Government***

The Lao Government claims to have a strong and clear policy on public participation issues. This has been expressed in the constitution, laws, decrees, notices and guidelines. In article two of the Lao constitution it states that *“All power is of the people, by the people, and for the interests of the multi-ethnic people of all strata in society with workers, farmers, and intellectuals as the core”* (Environmental Research Institute

Science Technology and Environment Agency [ERISTEA], n. d., p. 3). The Lao Government defined participation as “*an extension of consultation where directly affected groups become joint partners in the design and implementation of projects. They participate in making the decisions*” (ERISTEA, n. d., p. 3). This is similar to the Peasants’ Charter that the rural poor “*must be permitted to participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of rural development programs*” (FAO, 1981). At the village level the constitution is implemented by the village headman /Village Committee and the LWU. In practice participation is dependent on these local institutions and people.

### 3.4.2. ***Village headman / Village Committee***

The village headman has the highest authority in the village. He is chief of the Village Committee and chosen by local people. He is also a Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP) member and employed by the Lao Government. The LWU (2002) has done a study on ‘*Women’s participation in various Village Committees*’. This study explains the reason why women do not participate in village leadership positions (as shown in Table 1, Section 2.4). To be a village headman one needs to be accepted by local people and the Government. Figure 3 describes the standard structure of the Village Committee. The structure of a Village Committee includes a village headman and two or three deputies depending on the village size. There are also LWU, Lao Front for National Construction (LNFC), Lao Youth (LY) and elder representatives who assist the village headman (LWU, 2002).

A village headman is an official mediator for the Government, village and development organisations. Karkas (1999, p. 10) says that when it comes to development, “*the village headman must be on good terms with the local district Government in order to be able to attract services to the village. People believe that only those villages that have diplomatic heads are able to get projects to work within the village*”. The village LWU representative is the only women that must be selected by the village headman and formally appointed by the District LWU.

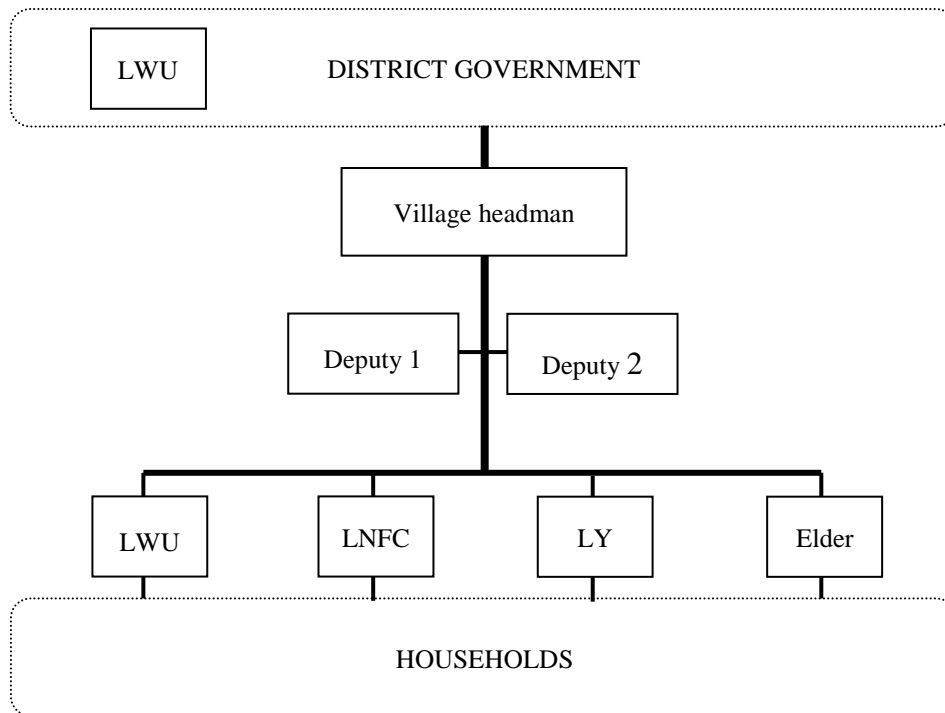


Figure 3: Organisational Structure of the Village Committee

Source: LWU (2002)

### 3.4.3. *The LWU at the village level*

The village LWU representative is selected in each village by the village headman. The roles and responsibilities are described by LWU (2007) as follows:

- To ensure the women in the village implement the three mottos “*be a good citizen; develop yourself well; and protect your family and culture*” (LWU 2007, p. 14);
- To ensure the LWU members of all ethnic groups contribute to implementing the village women’s development plan and the economic and social development plan of the party, committee and village authority;
- To ensure the solidarity of women, helping each other according to their ability; and
- To attend discussions with the Village Committee which concern women and children.

The Lao Government is organised in a horizontal and vertical structure. In the context of the village, the LWU fits into this structure. The village LWU representative reports to the village headman (horizontally) and the district LWU representative (vertically). The district LWU representative works with the village headman (horizontally) and village LWU representatives (vertically). Both the village and district LWU representatives must obtain the authorisation of the village headman before working with individual households as illustrated in Figure 4 (the Figure is based on the author's personal experience as a LWU member and her observations).

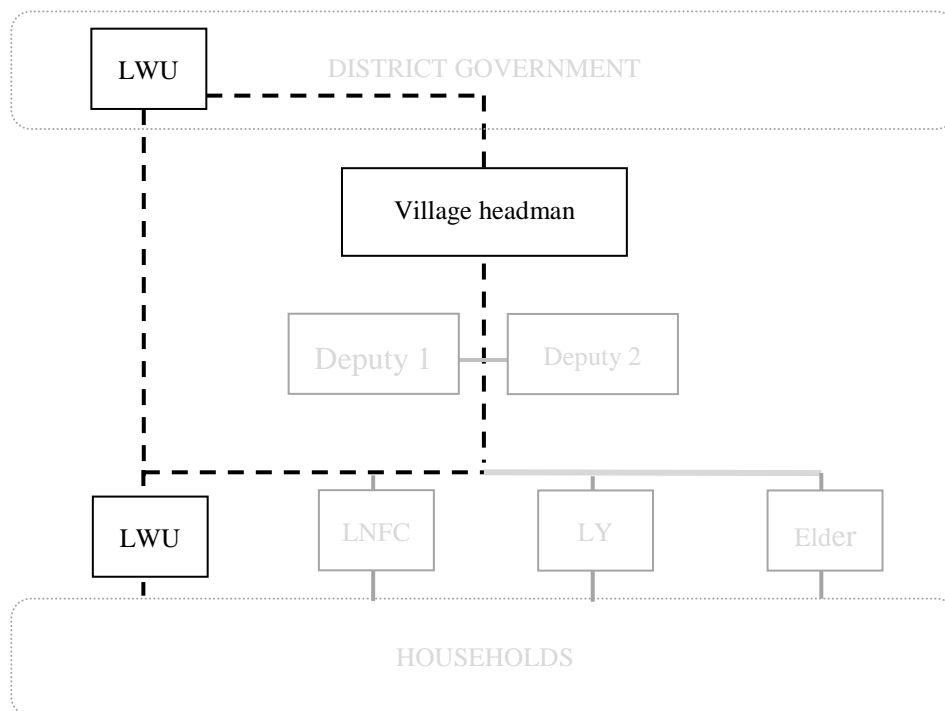


Figure 4: Horizontal and vertical structure of the LWU

The LWU seeks “to enhance women's capacity for self-development and promote women's role in society” (Laos Cultural Profile, 2005). The focus is on the poor and disadvantaged rural ethnic women at grassroots level. In other countries, civil society takes this role. The district LWU representative cannot work with the village LWU representative without the approval of the village headman. The same relationship applies to development project approvals. This provides a more rigid structure than countries where civil society organisations are encouraged.



### **3.5. Development partners: Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs)**

In the Lao context all development partners who work at the field level must receive approval from local Government and the village headman. They must have local Government officials to accompany them in order to access the community. This is a regulation of the Lao Government regarding NGOs working in Laos. This regulation is based on Prime Minister's Decree No. 71/ PM, dated 28 April, 1998, which states that *"Governmental agencies are directly responsible for NGO activities within their respective sector and localities"* (Japan International Cooperation Agency [JICA], 2008, p. 230). Although the activities of development organisations are regulated by the Government, the needs in rural communities and lack of national resources means there is pressure to accept the assistance offered.

Since the 1970s, the number and professional services of NGOs have increased. They are increasingly involved in development sectors where the government cannot fulfil its role, including capacity building (Shah, 2005). NGOs aim to contribute to the development of poor countries through various means, for example, provide funding, services and capacity building (Nkkhah & Redzuan, 2010). They play an important role in formal education through their expertise and infrastructure. In addition, NGOs are more flexible and have the capacity to innovate and adapt more quickly than local governments. Therefore, their operations can challenge government plans (Ulleberg, 2009). NGOs contribute to awareness and promote the self-organisation of many different groups. They are often pro-poor and promote gender equality. Nkkhah & Redzuan (2010, p. 85) state that *"NGOs have an important role to play in supporting women, men and households, and expected that they can meet the welfare"*.

#### **3.5.1. Roles of field staff**

NGO field staff often have to wear multiple hats and perform multiple roles, particularly in small organisation or small projects (Urzi, 2001). Siddique (2009) also points out that NGO field staff are actually the force behind NGO activities. This is true especially in the case of unstable government structures and unpredictable corporate sector involvement.

For example, in Laos many tree plantations have been approved without proper planning because of pressure from foreign investors (BBC, 2010). This can impact rural poor people and biodiversity. Field staff act as innovative agents of social change and are also the front line staff of organisations. Therefore, the quality of the organisations' work largely depends on the quality of critical thinking and analysis of development processes among staff at all levels, particularly the field staff (Siddique, 2009).

The field staff also play a key role for communities in liaising with outside groups such as Government and NGOs (Vanuatu Cultural Centre, n.d.). Field staff must be good listeners, to hear what people are saying. When people want to express their concerns they tend to talk. In order to do that staff need to visit the community more frequently at appropriate times (Hove, 2006). Also workers need to remember that the development activity is the community's project and give them responsibility for it. In this way the local leaders will become involved. Dieter (1996) adds "*the development agencies want to play the role of a supporter or a facilitator only. They cannot deal with every individual, but groups can be supported*". Field staff also have to facilitate the community to identify their needs and represent them (Office of Community Development, 2002). Since field staff play such a very important role in community development, it is necessary to study their attitude and how they understand the community they are working with and this is the purpose of this study.

### 3.5.2. ***World Vision Laos***

World Vision Laos (WVL) is one of the biggest International Non-Governmental Organisations (INGO) working in Laos. The target population is poor communities where Khmu are in the majority. Khmu people are targeted because of their lack of development and poverty status. World Vision is particularly focussed on the well being of children. The vision of the organisation is "*for every child, life in all its fullness. Our prayer for every heart, the will to make it so*" (WVL, 2007a, p. 4). World Vision helps to improve the quality of life of children through the implementation of Areas Development Programs (ADP). Normally it is about a 10 to 12 year program. The objective of the

program is “*sustainable improvement of the food, health and general livelihood security of the people in XiengNguen district by increasing and diversifying food production, improving mother and child health care and building and encouraging local capacity to address poverty issues*” (WVL, 2005, p. 6). The ADP covers many different sectors including health, education, livelihoods, disaster management and capacity development for local leaders (WVL, 2009b). Five main projects contribute to the program in both villages (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of projects and their objectives

Projects	Objective	Examples of project activities
Food security	To improve food security and resilience of poor and poorest households	Train farmers on improved rice varieties Set up Village Development Fund Management Committee
Health	To improve health and safety in target villages	Provide training on nutrition and complementary feeding Provide support to mobile teams to organise health check up for mothers and children
Education	To educate boys and girls for life	Build and upgrade school infrastructure Provide desks, chairs, blackboards and basic teaching aids
Leadership/ human capacity development	To improve the capacity of men, women and children to participate in the sustainable development of their communities	Set up Village Development Committee Train Village Development Committee members in village and development management
Sponsorship	To facilitate a smooth implementation of ADP operations	Set up project management system and develop staff capacity

Source: WVL (2009b)

Out of five projects, only the health, leadership and human capacity development projects specifically mention women’s participation as a desired outcome. Although women’s primary responsibility is for household food security, the food security projects target poor households, not women. For example, the farmer training activities are mainly attended by men.

WVL uses Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) as a tool to allow people to participate in project activities. It is *“a process in which we and the community learn about their context, needs and opportunities and to develop activities to improve their development situation and to increase their empowerment”* (WVL, 2007b, p. 3). The needs of all different groups in the community, including women and children must be represented, understood and addressed (WVL, 2009a). Different groups meet separately at convenient times and locations to ensure that everyone contributes in group meetings. WVL uses the model ‘*Ladder of citizen participation*’ (Figure 5) to explain the meaning and level of participation to staff and stakeholders.

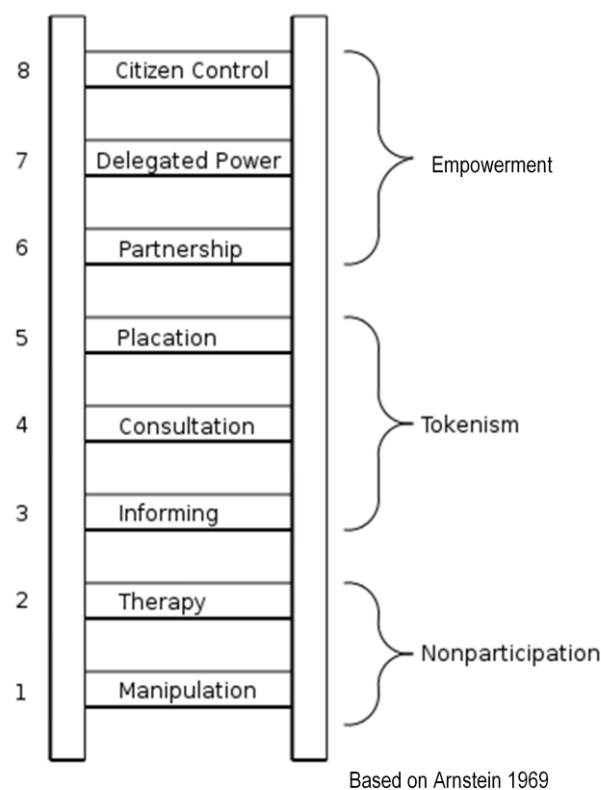


Figure 5: Ladder of citizen participation

Source: WVL (2009a, p. 11)

Level one, for example manipulation and level two, for example therapy, are considered as a non participation. However, they do have a role in helping to achieve public support, for example for a public health campaign where local people are not aware of the risks. Level three, four and five (informing, consultation and placation respectively) are

classified as a degree of tokenism, where the local community are told what is going to happen to their community. They are consulted and voice their opinions but there is no guarantee these will be accepted, for example in preparing an impact assessment of a new road. Finally level six, seven and eight (partnership, delegated power and citizen control) are the top degree of participation which is called 'Citizen Power'. With this degree of participation people can make decisions, negotiate and have full power (Arnstein, 1969). WVL aims to see local participation at this level. For example, WVL expects local people to be able to manage the Village Fund (WVL, 2009b, p. 19):

*'The responsibility for management and use of the funds will rest with the community. Village meetings will constitute a forum to actively involve villagers in preparing guidelines, planning and prioritizing activities. Communities themselves will decide whether they would prefer to have one general fund or different funds earmarked for specific topics/ priority areas identified by communities'*

The participatory approaches that WVL uses are not specific for the Khmu. A better understanding of Khmu people and their views on participation or collaboration would make WVL development programs more effective.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

Early theories of rural development focused on top-down approaches. Today it is recognised that participation is necessary for sustainable development. However, the meaning and practice of participation varies widely. Its definition depends on the people, community and development organisation's interests. Traditionally men and women have different roles and responsibilities in the community. Often participation in meetings and leadership is dominated by men not women. This has important implications for development organisations who try to empower women. Often development activities correspond with men's traditional roles rather than those of women, making it difficult for women to participate.

## **Chapter Four: Methodology**

### **4.1. Introduction**

The main objective of this research was to explore Khmu women's participation in development projects. This chapter describes the research methodology and process. It includes a discussion on the research approach, selection of participants, data collection and analyses. It also considers the issues of cross-cultural research, ethics, and finally the constraints affecting the study.

### **4.2. Research approach**

The approach focused on development partners and the Khmu community, especially women. A case study approach was adopted to explore the situation. It is a means of gathering information which is relevant to an investigation. It may comprise of one or multiple cases. Woodford (2008) suggests a triangulation of sources is important to understand a situation. This research has been achieved by using three sources: a view of available literature, and interviews and observations in two different villages. These two villages were chosen to explore women's participation in development projects. It was not intended that they represented Laos.

Qualitative research techniques were used to gather this information. Qualitative research provides rich information about people, their experiences and behaviour (Bryman, 2004). Furthermore, qualitative methods provide a more personal setting, which suits the Khmu community and culture because people are more likely to share openly and honestly once relationships are built. Babbie (2004) suggests that qualitative research is interpretive as things have different meanings for different people. In this study the qualitative techniques used included in-depth interviews and observation. This type of approach is referred to by Davidson & Tolich (2003) as ethnography which combines observation and unstructured interviewing. It focuses on detailed and accurate description. This helped explore the perspectives of all the different people who participate in development projects.



Khmu language made the observations crucial to triangulate the data in this study. Qualitative research was the most suitable method to gather this information.

### **4.3. Participants**

The target participants of this study were the Khmu community members especially the women, Lao Women's Union (LWU) representative and WVL staff. Prior experience working with WVL provided contacts to begin research and arrange research approval from the district Government before visiting the project sites. On arrival in the project communities, personal introductions and an outline of the research project was provided to the village headmen. Given the nature of the research it was important to observe the whole community and development activities as well as individuals. Participants were selected for in-depth interviews and observation during project activities and in the household.

Participants were chosen to gather information on different perspectives of women's participation in community development projects. They included Khmu women (12) selected from different socio-economic backgrounds and status, and Khmu men (12), primarily husbands of the women selected. It was not within the scope of this project to interview those husbands working outside the village, so other men who were available were interviewed in their place. WVL staff (8) with experience working with Khmu communities and related policy were also selected. One LWU representative was selected from each village (2), one with an understanding of their roles of women and their activities in the village; and the village headmen (2), one from each village. Village headmen act as official mediators between the Government, village and development organisation. Village headmen are the only people able to provide statistics about people and properties in the village. They have full authority to make decisions and approve all matters in their village. During the research I also recognised I was a participant as I reflected on my experience as a staff member.



The respondents were selected to represent the differences in terms of socio- economic background in the community. In qualitative research using the case study method of sampling tends to be purposeful with the aim of capturing the diversity of the situation (Woodford, 2008). The research was not aimed at having a large sample but rather to have a small sample providing in-depth knowledge, as suggested by Bryman (2004). A total 36 participants were interviewed and observed (Table 4).

Table 4: Numbers of participants interviewed

Group	Individual	Village One	Village Two	Total
Khmu Community	Women	6	6	12
	Men	6	6	12
	Village headman	1	1	2
WVL Staff	Program Manager	-	1	1
	Program Design Officer	1		1
	Animal Bank	1	1	2
	Village Fund	1	1	2
	Agriculture	1	1	2
LWU	Village representative	1	1	2
	Total			36

#### 4.4. Data Collection

Data collection included in-depth interviews and observations.

##### 4.4.1. *Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants (Table 4). Free-format responses were collected to allow room to pursue topics of particular interest to each. This allowed them to talk about their experiences, explain their situation and describe events that had occurred in their lives. A similar approach is suggested by Bryman (2008). In-depth interviews allowed a relationship to be developed with informants and a greater understanding of their views.

Interviews with Khmu women and men were conducted separately while they were sitting at their houses and provided an opportunity to experience the household's normal day to day activities. This provided a relaxing setting and also allowed them to carry on working and taking care of young children while being interviewed. Before the interview started, women were asked about their farming to help start the conversation and hence worked as a stepping stone for a trusting relationship.

The interview questions were developed based upon a livelihood strategic framework (Appendix III). This provided an understanding of the Lao Government's strategic approach to rural poverty eradication which focuses on five accessibilities (Figure 2, Section 2.6). It also helped guide data interpretation. The livelihood strategic framework is a people centred theory, where macro and micro policies, institutions and processes are linked to their impact on household livelihoods (DFID, 1999). The questions were open-ended with a minimum of structure, providing flexibility and allowing detailed information to be gathered as suggested by Bryman (2004). The questions were adapted during the research process based upon the responses and understanding of participants. The research took a descriptive approach to explore the livelihoods of the Khmu community.

Interviews with community women started off with general questions about their household followed by their involvement in community activities. This helped prepare women for the conversations about their involvement in development projects. Interviews with staff required more detailed discussion about the purpose of the study to gain their confidence. Interviews lasted between half an hour and one hour.

All of the interviews took place between Late-February and Late-March, 2010. The first interviews were conducted with the WVL project staff in the provincial office, followed by interviews in Village One. Time was spent reviewing and reflecting on the interviews before visiting Village Two. As soon as each interview was complete, notes

were made of the main findings and key observations (Babbie, 2001). At the end of each day reflections were recorded from experiences in the community.

A tape recorder was used to capture the conversation during the interview. Khmu interpreters who were fluent in the Lao language were present for each interview in the communities. In some cases where participants could speak Lao, the interpreters did not have to translate all the time but provided clarification when the participant had a problem with the language. To avoid losing the meaning of words each interviews was fully transcribed into English as soon as possible after the interview.

#### 4.4.2. *Observations*

Often community based research is exploratory and observations form the basis of theory generation. Observations took place on the same day interviews were conducted in the village. Apart from participant observations made during the interviews, daily life activities in the village were observed. Staying overnight with host families allowed the lifestyle and interactions among family members to be observed, for example the division of labour and decision making. Finally the interaction between staff and community members during project activities and the approach of staff were observed.

#### 4.5. Data Analysis

Qualitative research is usually analyzed by content/narrative analysis as suggested by Babbie (2004). The data were fully transcribed. Observations on the interaction of Khmu women, men and project staff and the in-depth interviews were coded into themes and patterns during data processing. Coding helped to identify themes and patterns in the data. An Excel spreadsheet was used to help with the coding. Each interview response was put in a separate row and sorted by theme. The find function was used to identify key words. The data was closely examined for sequences and compared for similarities and differences.

#### **4.6. Cross-Cultural Research**

The study involved cross-cultural research. As a Lao-Tai woman, my culture, language, and perspective are different from the Khmu. Cross-cultural research is complex because it involves understanding the culture, community values, along with its knowledge and history. One of the questions when conducting research in the cross-cultural situation is whether the researcher is the right person to conduct the research (Davidson & Tolich, 2003). Previous experience working with the Khmu, especially with women provided awareness and sensitivity to their culture and how to communicate with them. The assistance of Khmu interpreters, who were fluent in Lao was very helpful in completing the research.

#### **4.7. Ethics**

Care was taken in the research process. Before interviews were conducted, participants were informed about its purpose and how long it would take to complete. Participation was voluntary. Most of the women in the village were not able to read and write so an explanation was provided to participants about the need for consent before participating in the interview. Those who agreed verbally to be interviewed were considered to have consented to be part of the research. In rural areas of Laos, villagers, particularly women are not comfortable being asked to sign forms. Khmu society is based on oral communication and they do not have a written language.

All information given by participants was treated with confidentiality. Participants were not required to give their names or any contact information to ensure that the information given would bring no harm, either physical, psychological and/or legal (Jennings, 2001). Furthermore, participants were informed about their right to stop the interview if they did not want to continue. When interviewees are quoted, codes have been used to protect confidentiality. For example, WV1, S1, V1H were used for women, staff and men respectively in Village One. For staff MA was used for the manager and DME for the program design staff. A coding sheet is provided in Appendix I. Data stored on computers was password protected and field notes were stored in a locked room.

#### 4.8. Constraints

It is important to mention the constraints of this research included few opportunities to observe agriculture activities as originally intended. Agriculture is an area where community and project implement activities together. However, Government counterparts were not available to implement the activity with the field staff and community at that time. In the Lao context, field staff must have a local Government official accompany them to access a community. Therefore, only the Village Fund and school activities were possible to be observed during the research. In addition, a fire incident in Village One prevented me from entering the farms. Also because of a long walking distance to the farms in Village Two, I was not allowed to go and observe the women's participation in farming on this occasion. As a female researcher in Khmu communities, these were some of the barriers I also faced in completing research which a male researcher may not have come across. The research was also limited by the time available in the field and the number of interviews and observations which could be conducted.

The research was also limited initially in that field staff lacked detailed information about the village and the households. For example those were rich, poor or vulnerable. This increased the time required to understand the dynamics of the village and delayed the selection of suitable women for interview.

Women were not used to having conversations with outsiders and especially providing opinions or answering questions about development projects. Even though questions were open questions, most women still answered "yes" or "*I don't know*". Question had to be repeated a few times to get a response. When they answered they responded with only one word. When asked the "*why?*" for clarification, most women laughed. They were shy and kept silent and changed their answers. This made the interviews takes a long time to complete and transcribe. Initially community members perceived me as one of the project team members. They hesitated to provide honest answers about their participation in project activities. It took a while until they understood that I was independent.

Working in three languages was the major challenge. Care had to be taken to ensure the meaning was translated accurately. There are many Lao words that cannot be translated directly into English because the culture and history of Laos are not well known to English speakers. Also there are many words in Lao that do not exist in the Khmu language and Lao words are used. This may affect the understanding of Khmu people. However, as I have worked with the Khmu people for many years, I have developed a deeper understanding about them. After the visit to Village One the interpreter could not continue to Village Two due to health problems. I had to find a new interpreter who had to be oriented about the research which caused further time delays.

## Chapter Five: Results

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the results of the research. First, Section 5.2 describes the village context of the research case studies. Section 5.3 looks at the livelihoods, roles and responsibilities of women in the household and community. Section 5.4 focuses on participation in development projects. Section 5.5 examines the roles and approach of field staff in the community. It also considers the ethnicity of staff and their awareness of the communities with whom they work. Section 5.6 explores how participants interpret '*participation*' and the level to which staff expect women to participate in the project. It also looks at the motivation of women to participate in community and project activities outside the household. Finally, Section 5.7 identifies the barriers women face to participation in projects and Section 5.8 looks at how women overcome these barriers.

### 5.2. Case studies

Two villages were chosen to conduct the study and to compare the level of women's participation in development projects. As mentioned in Section 4.2 these two villages are different geographically and in the number of years WVL has been involved. The two villages were selected from 52 villages in ADP one and 31 in ADP two. The demography of the two villages is compared in Table 5 followed by a detailed description of each.

Table 5: Village demography

Village information	Village One	Village Two
Involvement of WVL	Over 10 years	5 years
Village establishment	36 years*	7 years**
Households	95	110
Males	95	673
Females	100	345
Boys	205	-
Girls	175	-
Poor households	-	31

\*Voluntary    \*\* As a result of Government and policy

### 5.2.1. *Village One*

Village One is located 66 kilometres southwest of Luang Prabang city, the capital of the province. The village is in a mountainous area but it is located along the busy main road from Vientiane to the northern provinces which makes it easily accessible (Figure 7).

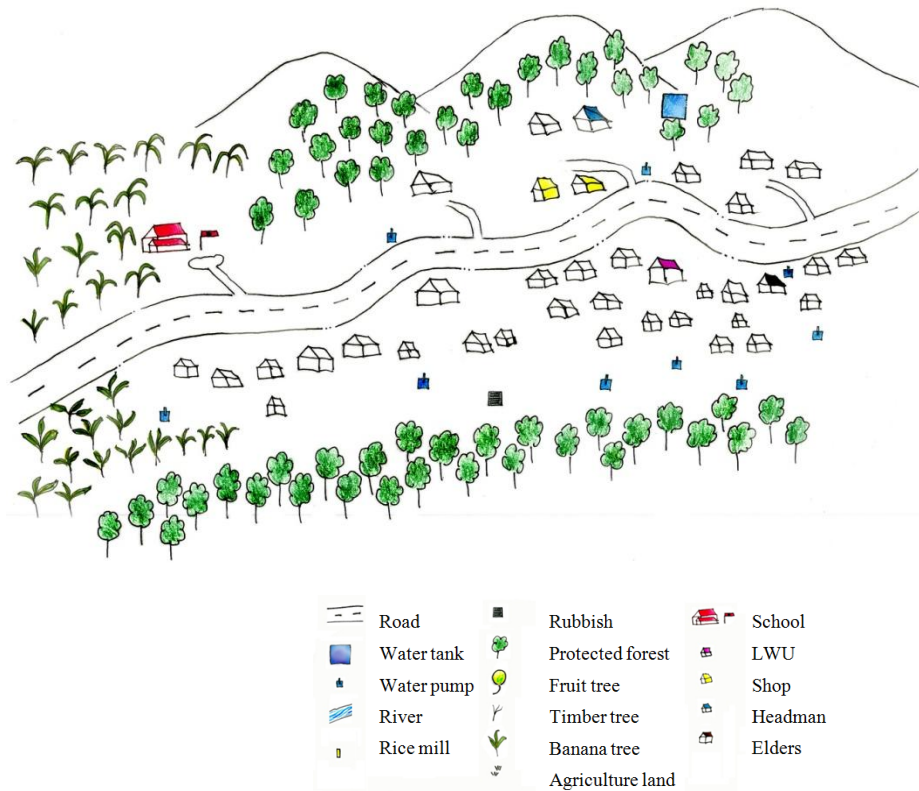


Figure 7: Village One community map

(Source: Redrawn of community members during PLA activity)

According to the village headman, in 1996 the Government introduced the land allocation policy in the village. A small family received three hectares and a big family received five hectares for upland farming. The village also has protection forest<sup>1</sup> which belongs to the community. The forest is a source of subsistence including non-timber forest products

<sup>1</sup>Protection Forest is forest and forest land classified for the purpose of protection of watershed areas and the prevention of soil erosion. It also includes areas of forestlands significant for national security, areas for protection against natural disaster and the protection of the environment and other areas (Forest Law, 1996 as cited in Manivong & Sopthathilath, 2007).



such as bamboo shoots and mushrooms for food and grasses for making brooms. However, today food or non-timber forest products are scarce.

Most people's farmland is near the village. The villagers are 'slash and burn' farmers. In the past glutinous rice was the main crop for cultivation but today the Lao Government also encourages other cash crops. People plant more bananas, sweet potatoes, corn, pumpkins and cucumbers but less rice for home consumption. The main income for this village is from selling bananas. Since the village is along the main road, there are lots of marketing opportunities for this village. Every day the merchant with his truck would come to collect bananas and other crops in the village and from the farms along the road. Apart from raising livestock such as cows, pigs, goats, ducks and chickens, women also collect vegetables, bamboo shoots, small fish, crabs and snails for food. Men look for fish, squirrels and other kinds of wild animals.

The existing village infrastructure and services include a gravity fed water system, rice mills, village hall, many shops for selling food and other basic household materials. More recently small a pharmacy has been established. Some households also have satellite TV however, only people who live along the road have access to electricity. Motorbikes are the main transport in the village. Men mainly use them for going to their farms and visiting neighbouring villages. Nearly every household has a motorbike. This means people spend less time travelling to their fields and have more time available for project activities in the village. Some households have a truck and those houses along the road are large and equipped with modern appliances. Everyday a butcher comes on his motorbike to sell meat. Since the village is located along a busy main road there are many accidents where vehicles hit pedestrians. There is a primary school within the village which was rebuilt by WVL. The number of boys and girls in lower grades are similar. Students who wish to attend secondary school have to travel a long distance away from the community. Some parents who have a motorbike take children to school early in the morning and pick them up in the evening. Other students get a lift home at the weekend by truck. Poor people may not be able to afford to send their children school and girls often do not go to secondary school.

### 5.2.2. Village Two

Village Two, in the north-eastern part of Luang Prabang province, is one of the poorest villages in the district. The village is located along a dirt road, about 80 kilometres from Luang Prabang city. Access is limited during the rainy season (Figure 8).

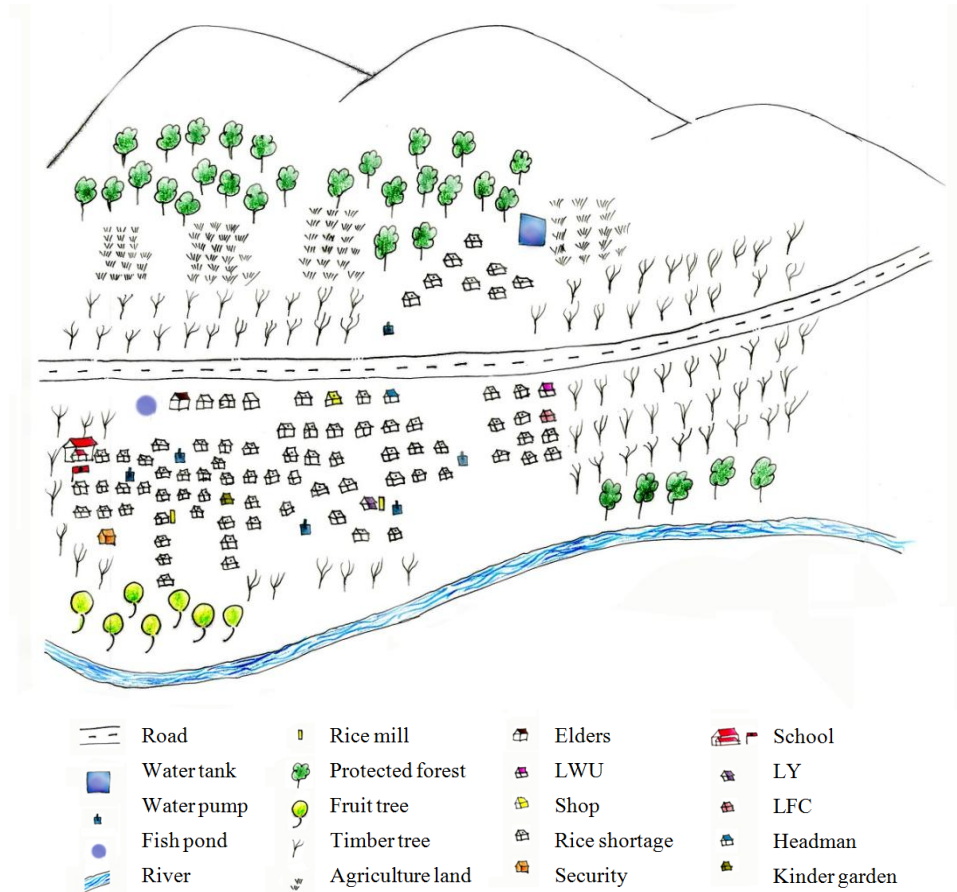


Figure 8: Village Two community map

(Source: Redrawn of community members during PLA activity)

The village is surrounded by mountains and a river. It is a combination of three communities from different areas. Two communities are from a remote area, with no road access and far from the resettlement area. The other community is from nearby. For many households their cultivated land is now far away from their new home. Most of them are ‘slash and burn’ farmers. They cultivate glutinous rice, and different kinds of vegetables,

hunt and catch fish for consumption. They also collect non-timber forest products such as bamboo shoots, mushroom and vegetables. Many families plant sesame and work on a nearby plantation which is owned by a Chinese company to earn income. Village Two also has protection forest, where local people are allowed to collect fire wood, food and hunt for household consumption.

As a result of resettlement many households have to stay on their farms or in their old homes during the farming season. It takes at least four hours to walk to their farms from their new home. Often women stay at the farm to look for food during the week and bring it home at weekends for their children who are still at school. Some children go to stay at the farm with their parents over the weekend. Most households still store rice and keep their animals on their farms at the old village site. After the harvest, villagers return from time to time to carry rice home and look after the animals. Land for resettlement does not include farmland only a piece of land upon which to build a new house. They still own the land at the former village site. According to the village headmen, every household received 10 x 15m<sup>2</sup>. This is a limited area for gardening, planting fruit trees and raising animals.

The village has some facilities such as a water pump and electricity. However, not all households have access to electricity, particularly the poorer households who live at the back of the village. The village also has one very small shop which sells basic supplies such as petrol, washing powder, salt and candy. Twice a week a butcher comes on his motorbike to sell meat. However, there are not many people who can afford to buy it. Once a month Vietnamese men bring utensils on their motorbikes to sell to the villagers, however they can buy these on credit not necessarily in a lump sum. At the end of the year the Vietnamese men come and collect their money. The village also has a few rice mills. However, women are still pounding their rice manually because many of them cannot afford to pay for rice mills.

Village Two has a primary school within the village. Similar to Village One, the number of boys and girls in lower grades are not much different. The secondary school is about one hours

walk from the village. Some students go to secondary school by bicycles but most walk. They start walking at 6:30am and school starts at 8:00am. The distance may discourage children to attend and make parents reluctant to send their daughters to school.

### 5.2.3. *Village administrative structure*

Both Village One and Village Two have a similar administrative structure. To enhance food security and livelihoods WVL has a policy of establishing a Village Development Committee<sup>2</sup> (VDC) in each community. This becomes a part of the existing Village administrative structure (Figure 9). Their role is to manage development activities such as CDW, VHW, the Village Fund (Box 1), Animal Bank (Box 2) and Rice Bank (Box 3). These are setup as tools to reach the poorest households. Most of the members are men and therefore decision making is dominated by men. The only two women who represent women in the village administrative structure are the Lao Women Union (LWU) representative and the Traditional Birth Attendant (TBA). The LWU and TBA are already part of the village administrative structure.

The main objective of project activities in the two selected villages is to improve livelihood security particularly food and health of people in the target district. Project activities are designed to fit into the existing village structure. Often project staff believe that

#### **Box 1: Village Fund**

WVL provides a one-time cash injection to the community in the region of 100-300 USD depending upon the needs and size of the village and the projects available funds. This money is added to the contribution from the community and loaning can commence. All member households continue to pay a monthly contribution to

#### **Box 2: Animal Bank**

WVL provides selected families with a buffalo, cow, pig or goats to raise for an agreed number of months/ years before giving it back to the project. Recipient farmers will be allowed to keep the offspring of the lending period while the original animal is distributed to another needy family.

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<sup>2</sup> VDC is local development leaders who are the community members. Village headman is the head of the committee.

the LWU are responsible for gender empowerment and so staff do not need to pay attention to it. S1AB said “*I think the LWU in the village do their job to encourage women because the village set up the LWU a long time ago. We did not set it up. They know their job*”.

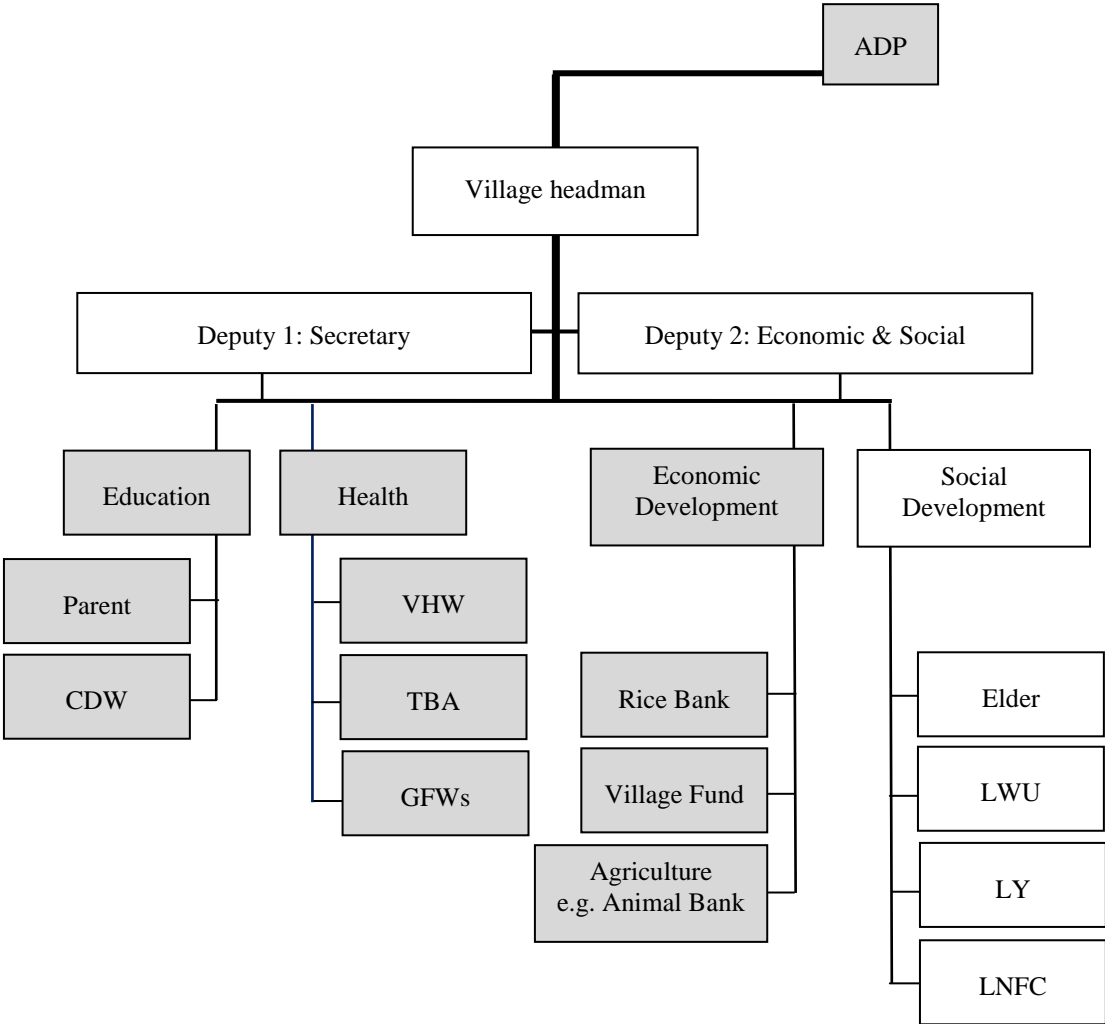


Figure 9: Relationship between VDC and existing village administrative structure

The role of project staff in gender empowerment is only addressed specifically if they are assigned to be the responsible person in the project. Although gender is part of trainings other parts of the project do not seem to incorporate gender into their activities.

Before calling meetings the Village Committee normally meet first. This meeting normally consists of the village headman and the other two deputies. The Village

Committee normally talks to the man who is the head of the family. If they are not available then they talk to women. The village headman reminds community members to attend meetings by ringing a bell three times. The first time is for preparation, for example get up and eat. The second time is to start walking to the meeting and the third time everyone should be in the meeting place. However, for women, they have to make extra effort to attend the meeting. They have to get up early and do their housework and feed the children first.

### **Box 3: Rice Bank**

WVL provides a one-time cash loan to establish the bank. The amount depends on the size and needs of the village. All member households can borrow and repay loans with low interest for an agreed number of months/years.

The village headman in Village Two manages what women say in meetings, which limits their freedom to talk and discuss openly. The headman VH2 said:

*If the visitors from the province come to visit, I give advice to the women first. I choose who can talk. They can't talk even if they are able to. If they do not say it right and if we just say we might say it wrong which could offend the Government. For those who are good at talking I let them answer only a few questions and then stop. For the project work especially I don't just let ordinary people answer the questions because they might say the wrong thing.*

#### **5.2.4. The differences between the two villages**

Overall these two villages are different in many ways. Village Two falls within the District of Pak Xeng, which is identified as one of 47 poor Districts in Laos, whereas Village One is in Xieng Ngeun is not identified as poor officially. The location of Village One has advantages in terms of economic development. It is on the main highway which provides easy access to Government services, markets and transportation. In contrast, Village Two is located in a remote area where the condition of the road is not good and therefore the cost of transportation is higher. In addition, Village One has been settled more than 36 years while Village Two was just resettled seven years ago. This village is still facing negative impacts of resettlement including adapting to a new social and

economic environment. Village One is wealthier than Village Two. Village One earns their income mainly from bananas and other produce while Village Two does not have any income source except seasonal labour on the plantation. Furthermore, the number of people attending project activities in Village One is higher than Village Two. This may be because people in Village Two often stay overnight on their farms because their farms are far away from home. The farms of people in Village One are closer to home and they also have motorbikes for transport. Even though WVL has been implementing activities in Village One longer than in Village Two, the level of understanding of participation as a process does not appear to be different. For example women in both villages said they have heard about participation but they do not understand what it means. Participation is a new word for the Khmu in both villages.

### **5.3. Women's roles and responsibility**

#### **5.3.1. *Livelihood***

Women in both villages have a primary role in housekeeping, as the caretaker and to ensure the food security of the family. All women interviewed said that they look for food for daily consumption such as wild vegetables, mushroom, bamboo shoots, fish, crabs, prawns and snails. They also collect firewood, make the fire, steam rice, cook and collect water for the family (see Figure 10).

For many poor women they still have to pound the rice by hand. For some women when they have money, they buy meat to cook for the family. Most Khmu have extended families so women are not only responsible for taking care of their own families but also for their parents. Women are in charge of cleaning such as doing dishes, and cleaning the house. They are also responsible for feeding children and washing clothes for the family including parents-in-law. In addition, when the family has visitors, it is a woman's job to be responsible for taking care of the visitors and making sure they feel welcome. While staying with many families during the field research and from past experiences as a development staff worker, women also prepare the food, boil water and prepare the blanket and mattress for us.



Figure 10: Women's daily work in the household

Both men and women play a very important role in farming. However, for slash and burn cultivation, women must work harder than men when it comes to weeding after the seeds are planted. For Village Two where the farms are a long distance away, most of the women interviewed stay at the farm until the harvest season is complete. For example WV2P said:

*I always stay in the farm because there is nothing much to do here. I stay and work in the farm because it is a very long way to walk. When there is a meeting in the village, my children would go and get me and I come back. After the harvest season, I go to work in other people's farm to make money.*

Many of the women interviewed play a significant role in animal raising and seasonal cash crop production from which they generate income. Raising animals such as goats,



pigs, ducks and chickens are mainly the women's responsibility. Half of those women interviewed said that they really like raising animals to sell so that they can buy things for their family. Many women interviewed also obtain an income from selling seasonal crops from the farm and forest products such as bananas, corn, bamboo shoots and grass for making brooms (see Figure 11). WV1H reports that for the selling season her husband goes to look for bamboo shoots and brings it to her to sell but if it is for consumption then she is the one who looks for it. WV1C said *"I do mostly grow bananas and I can sell a lot. A merchant came yesterday and there were two trucks to buy bananas. I sell every two or three months. I do a little bit of rice planting. I grow more bananas. I grow rice just enough for eating but not enough to sell. Yesterday I sold bananas for 200,000 kip<sup>3</sup>"*.



Figure 11: Animal raising and income generation

### 5.3.2. *Household decision making*

Although both men and women are active in farming, the women interviewed seem reluctant to comment when asked about their involvement in household decision making. However, they answer easily that they can make decision about 'light work'. When asked "what is light work?" most women mentioned household chores such as cooking, collecting water and firewood and pounding rice. For these activities they do not have to ask or tell their husbands. When interviewed one woman who had been sick for a long

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<sup>3</sup> 1 NZD = 5,903 Kip

time, before and after she gave birth, said that this prevented her from doing farm work. She did not question anything her husband does or know what he plans to grow each year. For example WV2S said *“I just stay at home and do whatever my husband tells me to do. If he says go, I go and if he says stay I stay”*

Although women are responsible for raising animals they are not involved in some decisions about them. For example, WV1SE reports that she likes raising animals and wants to obtain funds from the revolving fund to have some goats but her husband does not agree to this. As an alternative this woman has chosen to buy a pig to rear instead. WV2C said that both herself, and her husband make decisions in the family. However, the final decision would come from the head of the family (the husband) because he is a leader and can give advice to his wife. Sometimes a woman’s participation may be blocked by her husband.

For WV2P, whose husband is sick and cannot contribute to farm work, she is left to make all the decisions for the family. She said *“I make all the decision at home. I married with an old man and now he is not healthy. He does not go anywhere. My husband is not like other husbands that is why I am poor”*. While staying overnight in the village, a wife was observed telling her husband what to say about the issue of fire in the farm when he attended the meeting (March, 7, 2010, Village One). In addition, widows who own houses and land are able to work and make decisions as the head of the family. WV1ST and WV1D said that before doing anything they have to ask their mother or mother-in law first because they are in charge of the house. They are the ones who make household decisions even though they do not attend village meetings or development activities.

Women in general make decisions on household chores. Their decisions about finance are limited and are supervised by the men. In exceptional cases where a woman is the head of the household, she does make the financial decisions.

### 5.3.3. *Social engagement in the Khmu community*

Khmu culture has few cultural activities. There are three main events that everybody in the community attends. First is 'Boun Pot Pee' or Khmu New Year, which is held on a different day in each village. In the past the whole village used to celebrate together for many days but nowadays each Khmu household has a small ceremony on their own. At the end of the year, Khmu people bring sweet potatoes, alcohol and kill chickens as sacrifices to the spirits of the house, parents and grandparents who have passed away.

Other social activities in which Khmu women participate are wedding ceremonies. Each of the women interviewed was keen to take part in these events. This seems to be a cultural norm in Khmu communities especially for women. It is not only acceptable but expected that community members participate. Both men and women have clear responsibilities. Women volunteer to help with preparations. They spend the whole day together. Women who have young children ask their mother or mother-in-law to take care of their children while attending these events. Women enjoy helping each other out, drinking, dancing, talking and having fun together. WV1SE said that she enjoys weddings because they are fun. She meets many people and talks to many women while preparing food. All the women interviewed in Village One said when there is a wedding in the village they help out even though the host is not one of their relatives. WV1H said *"when we have wedding event, it is impossible that we would let the host do all the work. We discuss about what food we are going to have such as vegetable and pigs. Where can we find these? We help all households that have a wedding"*. Men are mainly in charge of killing pigs and preparing other kinds of meat. Women are responsible for cooking, doing dishes, setting the tables and cleaning up. WV1SE said:

*For women we don't know how to cut meat, we do women's jobs. After men boil the meat, men bring it to the women to cook. After finishing cooking, men bring it to the guests who are invited to the weddings. We also go to join them when they eat. This year has many wedding; we have one every five days. I don't really get to go to the farm. We spend time together there.*

Finally, the women interviewed mentioned building a house and house warming. When people in the community build new houses normally the whole community help out (see Figure 12). Men build houses and women cook for the men. If they are relatives both the husband and the wife help but if not then only the wife or husband helps. Some of the women interviewed participate by passing wood and grass to the men on the roof. For house building there is an exchange of labour among people in the community. WV1M said that she does not help people in the village build houses because in her family she does not have enough labour to exchange. Only she and her husband work on the construction of their own house<sup>4</sup>. She said if she helps people build a house, then they would help me back. However, some women interviewed do not like to participate in these activities because they involve a lot of drinking.

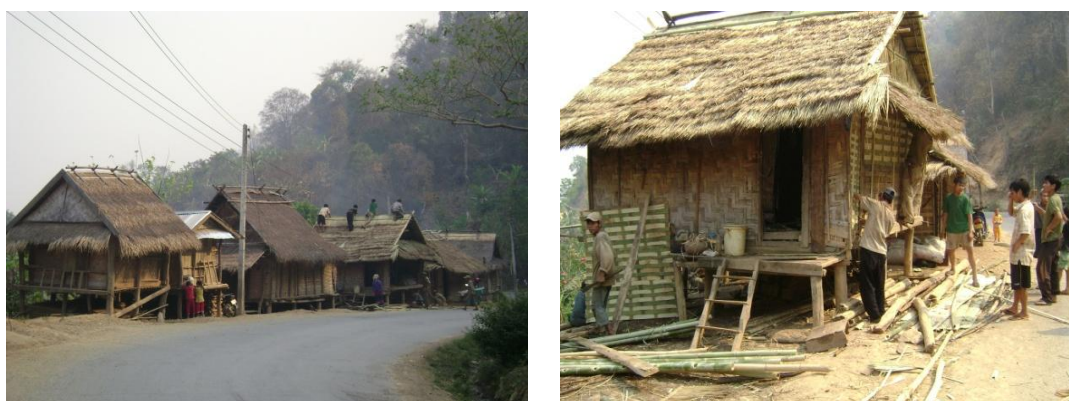


Figure 12: Building a house

In Village Two the situation is different. The village is the result of resettlement and not everyone takes part in community activities. Most work is done by relatives and friends from the same group. WV2C said *“In this village people don’t help each other. People help if they are your relatives. Kalor is one group and Houy chek is another group. We don’t get along well. When Kalor group has weddings Houy chek do not go and vice-versa. We are against each other”*. Resettlement results in social disconnection because it takes time for people to adapt to their new environment and relationships.

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<sup>4</sup> The Khmu build simple houses which must be rebuilt every four to five years.

## 5.4. Development Project

WVL implements the same ADP in Village One and Village Two. The programs focus on improving food security, health and community livelihoods (see Table 3. in Section 3.5.2 for project details). During the field research I observed the education, child sponsorship and Village Fund activities. Although these activities are not aimed at women specifically, they allowed me to observe women's participation in WVL projects. The activities that I saw correspond with strategic plan and vision of WVL.

### 5.4.1. *Women's roles and responsibilities in development project activities*

Women play different roles in project activities. Firstly, women act as passive participants in meetings. Women attend gender training, and activities related to the Village Fund, planting crops, health and hygiene for mothers and children. Many women interviewed said some times the LWU representative asks women specifically to participate in meetings related to women's issues. The village headman normally calls for general meetings and trainings. When the head of the family (husband) is not at home then women participate on behalf of men or the head of the family. All the women interviewed said when they attend meetings or trainings they just sit and listen to what people have to say. They are shy to sit in front, to talk or ask question even though they do not understand. They find it difficult to recall what they hear and discuss it with their husbands. When women do not consider it is their job to be in the meeting then they just come as an obligation and are not willing to take an active role.

Secondly, women work as labour in support to different project activities, especially LWU members. When district and project staff come to work in the village, women are responsible for cleaning the village hall and boiling water for the meetings and trainings. If the meeting or training goes more than half a day women are responsible for preparing food and cooking for the staff and Village Committee. In addition, when it comes to construction activities such as building a school, the village hall or water systems, the women interviewed said that they are involved. For example, they carry sand or pass wood and other materials. WV1SE said *"I do not know how to make a table but I carry*

*wood to the people that know how to make a table. I help where ever I can. When people ask to clean the school usually the women go. Whatever work we can do we do. The jobs that women can't do people let the men do".* Thirdly, women contribute rice as an act of service. Women contribute rice for staff to eat while working in the village. Normally the village headmen would tell the LWU representative to go and collect rice from the community for staff who come to work in the village as a contribution. Finally, women also go to borrow rice from the Rice Bank when their husbands are out looking for food. Rice is important in Lao culture as it is the main food. It also brings harmony through sharing.

### **5.5. Roles of field staff**

The field staff play many roles while working with communities. They play both explicit and implicit roles for example: explicit roles are stated clearly on the staff job description. The staff who are community facilitators are mainly responsible for ensuring specific activities in the field are implemented such as the Village Fund, Rice Bank and agriculture, health and education projects. This includes trainings, meetings and communication and building relationship with the community. On the other hand the following sections describe implicit roles that have an influence on the community, project activities and how project goals are achieved. The community looks up to staff more than the organisation, because they have a relationship with individual staff rather than the organisation.

#### **5.5.1. *Teacher/trainer***

The majority of staff interviewed act as teachers or trainers. This is both an explicit and an implicit role. Expertise on certain topics is expected from this role. From my experience as a student and trainer, in Lao culture, teachers are always thought to be right and expected to know more than students. The exchange of ideas is not part of the learning process in the Lao education system. Students normally accept everything teachers say. Most students would not question or show their teacher that they have different ideas of issues because this is considered disrespectful. The same situation

happens in fieldwork when staff conduct training or hold community meetings. They often act as a teacher and trainer (see Figure 13). For example, for gender training, health and hygiene and agriculture activities, they tell the villagers exactly what they need to do and how they should do it. S1VF said *“when we conduct gender training in the community, and talk about the work load of women, we tell them not just to let women work but also that men need to work”*. S2VF also said:

*I don't expect much from the women. I just want them to do what I tell them to do and then they do it. For the things that I didn't tell them to do, if they are not creative and take initiative, that is ok with me. I will feel very satisfied if, for example, I told them to grow at least a few vegetables in their gardens and when I come back I see that they grow vegetables. I don't expect them to grow for sale to the other districts or the province.*

When staff take up a teacher/trainer role, it limits community participation. For example, the community does not want to disagree with a teacher because it is considered inappropriate. As students, in the Lao culture, the community have to agree, and cannot make decisions for themselves. The staff interviewed believe that the activities WVL provide benefit the community as a whole but women in particular. S1VF said:

*My work is to conduct gender training. This activity is for women because we want to upgrade the role of the women in the community. That is why we have these activities in each village. We will train so that they know and upgrade the role of women. I see this activity has a good response from the women. They listen. Men understand and they do not let women work hard like in the past.*

S2VF is confident what he says is helpful to improve the livelihoods of the community. He said *“I don't want villagers to do nothing after the harvest season so every time I go to work in the village, I don't just do the work, I also teach them. I can make people laugh or cry. I use both technical skill and political skill”*. The confidence of staff comes from experience. The statement by S2VF *“I can make people laugh or cry”* implies that some

development staff have a lot of power over the community. This may result in participants being directed and prevent voluntary participation. The role of teaching allows staff to see themselves as leaders and believe that they know better than the community. This approach is similar to the Government top-down approach. If staff do not have a participatory attitude, it does not matter if the development organisation has a participatory approach. It is the staff that influence what happens on the ground. It is clear from the observations and interviews that staff do not share the same understanding of participation as the community or the different roles in development activities. A better understanding would contribute to empowering women.



Figure 13: Teaching Village Khmu Women

In the teacher role staff have to explain everything clearly and in detail. For example when villagers borrow rice from the Rice Bank, staff must ensure villagers understand how much to borrow, when and how they should return it. A poster of rules and regulations also hangs in the community hall so people can recall what has been taught. Training often includes both the theory and practical examples. For example in training the village veterinarians, participants are shown how to inject chickens. Also during data collection staff assist villagers learn to write and draw. The project officer DME recalls that:

*Women are active in the data collection process when staff work with them and move their hands to write. However, women do not do it without project staff.*



*They do not know what to do. So the project staff who work with the women's group have to plan and design how to work with them in detail.*

#### 5.5.2. **Learner**

The majority of staff interviewed, view themselves also as learners, especially given their limited knowledge of Khmu language and culture. Even though they do not attend a formal class about the Khmu, they seek to build an understanding while working with the community. S1VF said *“We just learn by practice as we go to work in the field or some people who go to the field tell us about the culture so that we are aware and respect them and do not make mistakes often”*. Most of them gain more understanding when they stay overnight in the community with a Khmu family. They try to learn about the culture and are keen to observe. Their primary objective is to make sure they avoid offending the community and not to make mistakes. The new staff are not confident in how to work with the Khmu, but those with more experience seem to be more confident of not making mistakes.

Some staff have gained a lot of understanding in terms of Khmu livelihoods and being able to speak the language while working in the field. S1RB said that before working with Khmu communities she had no idea about the Khmu livelihoods even though she had driven past Khmu communities many times. However, for some staff, learning Khmu language is crucial for effective job implementation. Familiarity with language helps them to do their job easier and to understand what people are saying about the project activity. Staff take up this role out of their interest and also learn the language to be more effective in the job. S1RB said:

*Older people don't know Lao. When we go to the field whatever they say we follow. Sometimes they said BERMA, what is BERMA? I ask. They said eat rice so I try to remember, I also remember how to say chicken, duck in Khmu language. We remember so that when we do activities for Rice Bank and when they talk about it then we know.*

### 5.5.3. *Follower*

It appears that when the matter relates to culture and beliefs rather than project activities staff tend to adopt the role of follower. Staff take care not to offend the community. In terms of culture, the majority of staff interviewed, think they cannot and should not go against the old community culture. When they interact with the community they observe and follow what the community does. For example, how they eat and how they play. S1AB said *“when we go to the community while they are having a festival, we will stay and eat with them. We play what they play”*. S1RB added *“when we eat with them we have to be careful not to use the wrong spoon or wrong rice basket. We have to eat and act like them”*.

In terms of spiritual beliefs, staff appear to have a strong conviction that this is a crucial issue. Whereas most of local WVL staff are Buddhists the Khmu people are animist<sup>5</sup>. Despite the major difference, staff respect the community's beliefs. They do not go against the community. In fact they follow what the community does. S2VF said:

*When people in the community are sick the community will seek for the witch doctor. They really believe it helps so we can't change this. When we meet them while they are having spiritual ceremonies (Bacci) we have to stay with them and drink with them.*

S1AB also said *“I have to go along with them because we can't go against them. It is their old culture from many generations”*. S1RB added *“we know how the villagers live and then we can follow”*. Participation requires acceptance by both project and community. Where the activity is culturally orientated, there appears to be more participation. Staff take on the follower role because they are apprehensive that the community would not cooperate with them, which leads to the task not being completed. There are incentives for the staff to make sure that women participate. It does not reflect

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<sup>5</sup> An Animist is one who worships or believes in spirit or souls existing in animals and plants

well on their job performance if women do not participate in the activities they organise. However, it may result in involuntary participation which does not contribute to the goals of the project.

#### 5.5.4. *Advisor*

The role of advisor is defined within and beyond the project activities outlined in the job description. It is based on staff experience, which often does not relate directly to the project activities for which staff are responsible. For example, those who are responsible for Rice Bank (S1RB) said:

*Many Khmu villages in the past did not have a herbal garden. I suggested to them that they should have a small household garden for food because the project also provides seed. The district staff also give them advice. Now we see many gardens in the village.*

I also observed the project manager giving advice to the village headman to grow more cabbages and cook them for many different dishes similar to the Lao-Tai ethnic group (March, 19, 2010, Village Two). Staff are looked up to and respected by the community. They have information that the villagers do not have due to their isolation. Staff live in the town and know about the market demand and opportunities that are available.

For senior staff, when they observe activities that are harmful to the community they advise on how the community should improve their livelihoods. Even though some issues are hard to deal with such as spiritual beliefs, they use their experience and examples to communicate with the community. To take up this role staff must be confident and earn the communities respect. Often this comes from years of working with the community. DME explained:

*In the core values of the organisation, we should respect everyone's beliefs, except if the belief harms the community such as when children are sick and the community kills an animal as a sacrifice. Some villagers organise a festival to*

*do this that requires a lot of money. We don't want them to face difficulties but we cannot make them change but gradually advise them about the positive and negative side of each activity.*

#### **5.5.5. Demonstrator/role model**

The demonstrator or role model is a crucial role played by field staff working in communities. They are watched by all community members and is an opportunity to influence the community. Their activities are more powerful than providing the community with formal training. Many poor people in the village, particularly women, do not have an opportunity to meet people from outside of the village. Staff are the only outsiders that they meet. To some extent, their novelty helps to convince community members to change. Some staff set themselves up as role models for the community as they think it will be an easier way to convince them by doing instead of asking the community to change. For example in respect to health issues and good hygiene. S1RB said:

*When we work in the field we stay with community. We see that community has specific ways of using their bowl, their spoon. For example at the dinner table, if we use the wrong one they would say no, this one is for morning and this one is for evening. For this we can't tell them straight away like don't do this, do that because it is offensive. Instead we stay there for many days, they watch and they see, we have to find other ways. For example, they don't wash bowls and pestle after use. It is true in many places, particularly in the very remote villages. We show it to them by washing them. They then tell their children. We did the first day and then the next day they told their children to do it.*

A positive staff attitude is one of the crucial factors to increase participation and achieve project goals. Some staff may not realise that they are role models for the community. From the interviews, one woman changed her perception of her daughter's education because she observed female staff working and being paid like men. WV1H said:

*I don't let anyone drop out of school now. In the past I did not know. We only did farming. I did not know that women can be a staff and have a salary. I did not know that. I saw other people, staff who work for Government and have a salary. It is an easy job. They don't have to be exposed to the sun and rain. I told children who are still in school to continue studying.*

#### 5.5.6. **Advocate**

Officially all staff members have to take on the role as an advocate for the community with which they work. Some staff try to advocate for women to encourage gender equality. In many Khmu communities it is not appropriate for women to eat with visitors. Also from the experience of staff working in communities, Khmu women work harder than men. For example, they carry heavy loads from the farm while men just walk without carrying anything. To address this issue a senior staff member pointed out the problem and discussed it with the village headman to help reduce women's workload. In addition they discuss issues with Government staff to gain their support for empowering women in the community. S2RB said *"If we do not talk to the district staff we will face a problem working with the community because if the district staff do not understand they do not want to promote women to be above them"*.

Staff are in a good position to advocate for women and encourage their participation. They communicate directly with the community and may have a greater knowledge about community activities than Government staff. They advocate for community health improvements and increased access to medical services instead of asking the community to stop traditional spiritual healing practices and sacrifices. MA said:

*We do a lot of advocacy on health education and provide drug kits. Other organisation like UNICEF also provides medicines and conduct regular check-ups. When people are sick we also encourage mobile health teams to visit the villages and provide health check-ups. In case of emergency people use village services and if the case is serious they bring patients to the health centre. Fewer cases now go to see the witch doctor for treatment.*

#### 5.5.7. *Ethnicity of staff and language*

The majority of staff (25 staff) in the two programs studied are from the Lao-Tai and other ethnic groups. There is only one Khmu staff member. He is also not a natural leader among his colleagues. The problem is finding qualified Khmu people to join the team. This is due to their isolation and low education level. As a Khmu staff member, he fits in and no problems of discrimination are observed in the project team or community.

Some staff said that they understand the Khmu language but they cannot speak it. S1AB said *“it is difficult to communicate when we want to explain things. We ask the village headman to translate. I can speak Khmu a little bit. I can understand them quite well but I can’t respond”*. Khmu and Lao are similar and from my experience listening to Khmu, a Lao-Tai ethnic person can guess what Khmu people are talking about, and the majority of Khmu understand Lao on a basic level too. For example S1RB reports *“In the Khmu village we don’t understand their language. When they talk to each other in Khmu, some words we understand but some words we don’t. That is why we have to guess what they are talking about”*. As mentioned in Section 5.5.2 to understand and work effectively with Khmu women, staff need to learn the language.

Many Lao words are used in the Khmu language, where no Khmu word is available. This leads staff to assume that they understand enough and there is no need for a translator. I was advised by project staff not to use the translator in Village One while conducting field research because they all understand the Lao language. However, without a translator I would have not been able to complete my interviews in Village One. Some staff said that if there is misunderstanding then the solution is to ask the village headman to translate. Some staff can only greet but cannot talk more than that. In Village Two during the Village Fund meeting, the project manager asked a Government staff who could speak Khmu to translate for him nearly the whole time. None of project team members could speak Khmu fluently (March 19, 2010, Village Two). This was reflected in S1VF’s comment *“we should not blame Khmu when they do not understand us. We should blame ourselves because we don’t know their language”*.

It appears that although the staff interviewed did not receive formal training on the Khmu culture from WVL, they are aware to some degree about the Khmu culture. Staff know how to behave and know what is and is not accepted in Khmu culture. A lot of customs of Khmu culture do not seem to surprise them. They are also aware that not all Khmu villages are the same. However, the awareness does not just appear. Staff have learnt from other sources. For example, some staff have worked in Khmu villages previously or have associations with Khmu people. Some clearly learn from their colleague's experience. S1RB said *"we do not have training about Khmu culture. We just learn by practice as we go to work in the field or some people who go to the field tell us about the culture so that we are aware and respect them and do not make mistakes that offend them"*.

#### **5.5.8. Staff perception of Khmu women**

Staff recognise that Khmu women have a low level of education and less interest in project activities than the Lao-Tai majority. Also, their lack of education and experiences outside of the home or farm makes it difficult to understand formal training. S2VF said:

*First they don't want to participate in project activities. Second, they are shy and afraid. They don't want to contribute their opinion. I don't know what they are afraid of. Maybe because they are shy of their language and shy to talk or because of their culture, women do not really participate. It is difficult to find them attending in any project activities such as trainings, meetings, health and education. If compared to the Khmu people, the livelihoods of the Lao-Tai ethnic group is good and they are in the middle and not poor.*

Women are not used to expressing themselves in public meetings and sharing their opinions. Therefore, when they are in the meeting they are shy, not brave and keep quiet. MA reported *"they seem not to be brave in speaking, talking and greeting maybe because of the language. Maybe they understand Lao language but they are not confident to talk"*

Staff are not sure if Khmu women are lazy. Although Khmu women are perceived as being lazy by their husbands and community, when staff go to the field they see women work very hard. S1VF said *“I don’t know what to say. If we say they are lazy, it is not lazy because they work very hard. Khmu women work hard”*. In the community, household, farm, they work hard and they are good hosts and generous. S2RB said *“they are kind and they also work harder than men when they go to the field and carry the big rice bag. For example we set up the Rice Bank, instead of men carrying bags of rice, but in fact there are more women carrying than men”*. For project activities and visitors, Khmu women are quiet and shy. Those who have contact with outsiders like the village headman are less shy and they tend not to be as poor.

Some staff observed that when Khmu women reach the age of 30, they normally have had many children and many of them are not healthy. The informal comment on this is that because many children die parents have as many children as they can. Some staff view Khmu women as people that do not have the capacity to lead the family or able to take part in the community like Lao-Tai ethnic women. It is common perception of Khmu people to say that they will do or say yes, but never do it. S2RB said *“if we tell them to do something, they always say yes or agree. They say they agree to do it, but when we come back to check what has happened, nothing has been done. Some people didn’t do anything about it at all”*.

#### **5.5.9. *Methods/ approach adapted by staff***

It appears that there is no consistent approach to encourage women’s participation. The majority of staff said that the primary importance is to be friendly and to encourage cooperation. For example, S1AB said *“we have to be friendly and to be close to them. Next time we go to work it is a more friendly setting. They would remember this person played with us and ate with us. If they are familiar with our face, it is easier to work with them”*. By attending regularly they become familiar with each other and respecting each other’s culture. Furthermore, some staff adopt the approach of asking women to sit in the



front and ask specific questions *“I ask them directly. If they sit at the back then there is no way that they would speak. The best way is to ask them to sit in front” (MA).*

As staff become familiar with the village they might identify a leader from a group activity to be a channel to speak with other people. Often they will work closely with the Village Committee to get them to talk to their own people. During the project Participatory Learning and Action (PLA) activities, project staff, encourage women to share their opinions by dividing into separate groups, including one for men, one for women, one for children and another for the Village Committee. They found that where women are separated or in their own group they tend to talk more.

To encourage women to take part in the project activities a popular approach is to provide incentives/materials to make them feel like they get something out of the project. S2VF said:

*The best way is to give funding, for example, to dig the fish pond or to provide the seeds or bring money in and set up the Village Fund. They will compete with each other to participate in the activities. If we call them for a meeting or training for learning how to grow crops, they come at the beginning but then they walk out. When the meeting finishes we hardly see anyone from the community remaining in the meeting room.*

Another approach adopted by staff to encourage women to participate is to involve the district Government staff. S2RB said *“from experience working in the field, one of the best ways to ensure the cooperation of the village is that district Government staff should go with the project team, because for sure the Government (district) staff have more power than us”*. And also to inform the village directly that the project needs women to take part in the activity as MA said:

*What we can do is we have to inform the women directly. For example, in the letters (sent to the village headmen) we should state clearly that we need*

*women to participate in gender training. And say that all women have to come and the more the better. We also need to use district LWU to help us to encourage women to participate if there is only project staff it is quite difficult to encourage them to participate.*

From my observation Khmu women appear to be more willing to talk to other women and to female staff of the project than to the village headman and Government staff. In the interviews many women said that as women they prefer to talk to female staff because they are not intimidated and female staff are easy to talk to. They said as women they understand each other better. When Government staff and other men talk in meetings, they are quiet, but outside the meeting they complain and do not agree with what has been said or implemented. As I observed at the Village Fund meeting in Village Two (March 19, 2010, Village Two), many women walked out from the meeting room and complained in their own language that they were upset how the Village Fund was being operated (see Figure 14) WV1SE said:

*Many of my friends are not brave but outside of the meeting they can answer and talk, but when they come to the meeting they are quiet. Sometimes they do not agree with what has been said in the meeting they come to complain at home. When they are in the meeting they are shy. They are not able to talk. Only men talk.*



Figure 14: Women sit and chat outside of the meeting room

#### 5.5.10. *Community engagement*

WVL has a policy for field staff to work in the field for up to 15 days per month. Most staff spend an average of one day per village per month but it also depends on the activity at the time. PLA appears to be the only activity where staff have to stay overnight for two or three days in one village. The number of staff staying overnight in the village has increased. MA said *“after the policy change (during 2004-2005) to pay field staff a per diem while working in the field, most staff then stay overnight because the per diem for each evening is 35,000 kip and morning only 10,000 kip. About 95 percent of staff stay overnight”*. All the staff interviewed, think that this is a good policy and allows the staff to spend more time with the community. It also helps the project to reduce the cost of petrol and avoids the dangers of staff travelling at night.

Some other reasons to stay overnight are that staff can start meetings with the community early. Normally the meetings start at 8:00 or 8:30 in the morning. If the meeting is short then the community can go to their farm after the meeting. This helps the community to save time. According to staff experiences having meetings in the afternoon is not convenient. The weather is too hot and the community are not at home. In addition, when staff stay overnight they can have formal and informal meetings and chat with the community at night. DME said:

*For villagers we meet when we gather in the village in the morning but at night the elders come and chat because Khmu elders like to talk. At night they come and chat about the project and development in the city and sometimes they tell us about the difficulty they have and want to request for assistance. Sometimes we chat until 10 o'clock at night.*

The staff do not seem to be able to choose where and whose house they want to stay in overnight. It is not appropriate for staff to stay overnight at the house of other community members unless it is agreed or organised by the village headman. Most staff stay in the village headman's house or other members of Village Committee who have big houses.

The village headman might be offended if staff do not stay overnight at his house. However, this may not apply to all village headmen. S2VF explained:

*If we don't stay in the village headman's house there will be a problem. He is not happy and he would say that we don't respect him and we respect someone else. But for some village headmen they are happy because they don't have to find food for staff to eat and prepare blankets for them. We do bring food but rice we don't bring, so some people have to provide rice for us. So to avoid the problem we have to first go to the village headman then we can discuss later where we are going to eat or stay to avoid the problem.*

For some staff they do not stay overnight in the villages along the road. They stay in the guest house instead to avoid disturbing the community. For example, the community have to prepare food and allocate blankets for staff for their overnight stay. Sometimes they have to kill their chickens for staff to eat (S1AB). This is a substantial burden for poor households as chicken may also be considered as an asset which they can sell when in need. For poor people they are worried about this.

While staying in the village staff do not seem to interact with other community members other than those in the house in which they stay. S2VF said “*If I stay in the village I take time to just walk around but I never go and talk to individual households*”. Staff said the only opportunity that they get to visit poor families and spend time with them is during the PLA activity. During this activity staff have to interview poor families and take their photos. Staff said they have a list of poor or vulnerable families from this activity.

However, when they were asked for a list, staff could not identify who were the vulnerable or poor people in the village. Often staff refer to the village headman to obtain this kind of information.

#### 5.5.11. *Challenges*

It seems to be a common challenge for all of the staff interviewed to organise meetings or trainings in the village that women will attend and participate in. Either husbands (the head of the family) or their children attend the meeting. Although staff inform the village of the meeting in a letter specifying the date and time villagers still go to the farm. In some villages it is hard to meet all the Village Committee members at one time. This shows that participation in project activities is not their priority. S2RB reported:

*Sometimes we drive past them and see them walking to the farm. We asked them to come back they don't even look at us instead they run faster. We look at each other and are confused why it is like this. When we make specific appointments with 12 members of the Village Committee all 12 never come. I don't understand because when we talk to them and try to explain to them and asked them if they understand they say yes but after we turn back they don't remember anything.*

The families who do not like to attend the project meetings are poor families and they are perceived as stubborn people who are busy looking for food. As S1RB says “*people who are stubborn and do not want to come to the meeting and do not obey the village authority are the poorest people*”.

The lack of engagement of Khmu women is one of the major challenges for most field staff. When they do attend meetings they are very quiet. Staff do not know how to get them to participate actively. Women just come to the meeting to listen. They tend not to ask any questions. Often they just smile and say yes if staff ask them to do something. Staff cannot ensure that the community understand what has been discussed. For some women language is still an issue for understanding what is being said. S1VF says “*They do not like to speak and also in a few cases do not understand Lao at all, so it is difficult to communicate*”. When working in groups one or two women usually talk. These women dominate the whole group and the rest of the group members appear to agree with what they said and keep quiet. The low education level is also mentioned as a challenge for

field staff. Even though staff spend a lot of time explaining and trying to help women understand project activities, men are the ones to come, borrow and sign off on their family's behalf.

Some staff still struggle with the culture and the customs of the community although the situation is getting better and many old customs have changed. Sometimes the culture and WVL policy are incompatible. For example, based on WVL policy, having children less than 18 years old serve alcohol to staff is not appropriate but it is a good thing for community to do as it shows their hospitality. DME said:

*In the past if there are visitors in the village they ask young women to serve food and alcohol. It is believed that it is their good culture and custom to be a good host. If they don't take care of visitor well they may be afraid that they would not receive the assistance. That is in the past but now it has changed a lot but some village authorities still organise food and alcohol for staff, kill chicken and have women to sit next to staff and serve alcohol when they come to visit. For this if we follow the organisation policy it is wrong to do this because most of them are younger than 18.*

## **5.6. Interpreting participation**

### **5.6.1. Khmu women**

#### **○ Village One**

Most women interviewed in Village One do not know what participation means. The word participation does not appear in the Khmu language. In Lao the word participation is 'Kan Mee Soun Houm' (ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມ). This word appears to be a new word or idea for the community to learn and remember. The translator used the Lao word 'Kan Mee Soun Houm' when asked to translate it into the Khmu language. Many of the women interviewed have heard about this word from the project staff and village headman but they do not understand its meaning. WV1M said "I heard this word before but I don't understand". Some of the women interviewed have never heard of this word.

Observations during the interviews suggest women have difficulty expressing the meaning of participation. They look confused about what is being discussed. Some women interviewed say they understand but when questioned further they say they don't understand. Many women in Village One were very good at talking about farm activities but when discussing the project and the word participation they were suddenly silent. WV1SE, who seems to be active in attending project activities, said "*I understand and then I stay at home and wait for staff. Yesterday I saw you came to the village. I told people that you are coming to work with women*". Attending meetings appears to be one understanding of participation among Khmu women.

○ ***Village Two***

The understanding of the word participation in Village Two is similar to Village One. Many women interviewed do not know what participation means. Some women have never heard of the word before. Even though some women heard staff use the word 'participation' or '*Kan Mee Soun Houm*', they could not remember what it meant. The women in Village Two appeared shyer than those in Village One.

However, WV2C understands the word participation as '*Pathana*'. According to her, it means want to get rid of poverty. This word in the Lao language means want, wish, and hope. She said "*I understand like we Pathana in our family*".

In Village Two I asked if people understood the word '*contribution*'. Most of the women interviewed understood this word; they seem to be able to talk about it easily. WV2L said contribution means to work together and help each other. It is also understood as '*sharing*'. WV2P said "*I understand that we should cook and bring food to share with each other*" It also means "*waiting for an order from staff*". WV2S said "*When they tell me to do something I will do it. At home it is the same when my husband asks me to do something I will do it*".

The word '*Samaky*' meaning harmony is also mentioned when people describe working and helping each other as a group. WV2P said "*In the meeting we are told to Samaky, eat together, helping each other. Go together, live together. This is what they say in the*

*meeting. But after the meeting, people just go and do their own things. We just live our own life, we don't share anything. We just eat what we have".*

#### 5.6.2. ***Khmu men / Headman***

##### ○ ***Village One***

The meaning of participation and contribution is not very clear to men in Village One. Some have heard about these terms but do not know their meaning. Others have never heard of them. The Village Committee members appear to have learnt this word from project staff. When staff said '*participation*' they know that the staff expect the community representatives to be able to '*make decisions*'. However, one of the Village Committee members said that in rural areas it is impossible to do what is expected by project staff. As VH1 said:

*For participation, the project and community must work together. It is impossible for project or community to work alone. We should have both. The project should advise about mother and childcare, life, how women should take care of children. There is no participation if mother does not know how to take care of their children.*

Participation is also interpreted as '*helping*', staff working in the village and '*cooperating*' with the project staff. In this concept, it appears that the community is the follower and project staff is a leader in project activities. Project staff are also there to provide advice to the community. HSE said:

*I understand [participation] like this. First, there should be one person to participate with project staff. Second, for example if we are going to build a school there should be one person show up to help the staff. This is participation. This is the work we are going to do. It is a responsibility. We are responsible for working with them.*



### ○ *Village Two*

All men interviewed in Village Two heard about the word '*participation*'. However, many could not recall the meaning of the word. For some men, participation means people '*working together*', '*attending project activities*' and '*sharing opinions*'. CM said "*the project wants us to contribute for example working together, participating in meetings, having a voice and contributing opinions*". It is also seen as '*contributing labour*' and '*helping each other*' or '*Samaky*'.

Although both villages are very different in terms of social and economic factors and the presence of WVL development projects, men in both villages have a similar understanding of the word '*participation*'. The number of men with this basic understanding of '*participation*' in Village Two is lower than Village One. However, the results did not provide the perspective of men who were working away from the community.

### 5.6.3. *Staff*

Participation is not a familiar word in the Lao language and hence there is a degree of unfamiliarity among WVL staff. However, either in the village or in the town, people use different terms or concepts to describe what development projects call '*participation*'. For example, in some cases '*cooperation*' is interpreted as '*participation*'. DME said "*participation is cooperation*". He also said "*participation is the involvement of many parties. Not only the villager's but also the Government. Therefore if they are not available at the same time it delays the task and takes a longer time*"

For WVL staff, the idea of participation begins with coming up with a proposal. MA said "*It is important in our project. Before we come up with a proposal we have to use the PLA. It lets everyone show or express their dreams about how they want to develop their family life, children and community*". Later it might mean '*attending a project activity*' and '*decision making*' and '*speaking and sharing ideas*' in the project meetings. What

appears to be important to some staff is that everyone must participate. S1VF said *“participation is all the work that we do, everyone should participate, for example, in my work, it is impossible for me to do the work alone. It needs to have involvement from many parties like the ADP team, finance team, district staff and community. We cannot work alone and if we work alone the work does not progress”*. Her perspective of participation comes from personal experience at work. However, for community participation, not everyone needs to participate in project activities. She said *“for my work as a person responsible for the Village Fund, participation does not mean everyone should participate”* (S1VF). A different level of participation seems to be acceptable in different situations.

Another word used in Lao for participation is translated as ‘contribution’. There is a connection between money, contribution, participation and development projects through some of their activities. For example, contributions to the Village Fund. S1VF said:

*The project provides three million Kip if there is no contribution from the village. It is impossible to have the Village Fund. If we give three million Kip in the year 2003 and if the community divides the money among themselves the money would be gone. If the villagers do not contribute money, the Village Fund would be gone by 2003. However, due to their contribution to Village Fund, we can maintain the Village Fund.*

One staff members noted ‘participation’ is to *“maintain peace in the village”* (S1RB). Everyone has an interest in the outcome. Another term used for participation is translated as ‘sharing’ For example, sharing work. Again this interpretation of participation has an important role within the community, project team and in the office. Similar to other translations of participation it means ‘group or team work’, ‘to share risk and make things work’.

S2VF said *“It’s a process of a group of people who do development work. All the members in the group give each other a guarantee. Also a disadvantage of participation*

*is that people depend on other people*". This is an important observation by a WVL staff member. Although development projects are intended to empower people they can also lead to dependence. Staff must leave room in participatory processes for people to take initiative and make their own decisions.

#### 5.6.4. ***Staff expectation for Khmu women's participation***

Although the organisation has guidelines on community participation, different staff have different expectations in respect to Khmu women's participation. One of the senior staff said that WVL expects up to 20-30 percent or half of the representatives in the Village Committee to be female for all ethnic groups. For example, out of seven members two should be female. For the three members of the Village Fund and Rice Bank there should be at least one women representative. However, in reality this expectation is not being achieved. Most women, particularly in remote areas have a low level of education so they cannot meet the criteria to be a member of the Village Committee.

The indicator of women's participation appears to be more of quantity than quality, or how women participate. For example, many staff interviewed mentioned that they expect women to be involved as much as possible. S2RB says *"It is not really difficult, if they don't come it is alright, but we want them to participate as much as possible"*. Often staff do not seem to consider carefully how women participate in activities. Only a few of those interviewed mentioned that when it comes to women's participation they want women to speak in the meeting, share opinions and have a plan to improve their family livelihoods. The majority of staff expect all Khmu women in the village to participate in all development activities along with men and children.

Staff are aware that they cannot set one expectation for all villages because the capacity of each village is different as it is for different households. S1VF said:

*I can't answer directly because it depends on each village. Each village is different. The village that has a good understanding and their Village*

*Committee is strong, the participation of the whole village is good and they are able to work with us well. For example we have activities such as the Village Fun. Some villages can manage it. In some villages they understand and welcome us well. But some villages don't.*

Staff expectations regarding women's participation depend on their motivation and understanding of participation and how they want to see participation in the community. There are also different expectations of women's participation for different activities and disciplines. For example, for gender training, the responsible staff expect to see more women participate than what is expected in other trainings and meetings. S1AB reported *"I really want them to participate but it is impossible. Even though most women are involved in agricultural activities, there are only the men involved in the training"*. This prevents women from being empowered to improve agricultural production.

#### **5.6.5. *Motivation to participate in community activities and project activity***

##### **○ *Exchange labour in community***

Labour is very important in rural communities. Being isolated from public services, community members must depend on each other more. For example, when building a new house or organising a wedding, community involvement is not only required, but expected. People in the community realise that it is important to help other members so that when they need help their contribution will be reciprocated. WV1M said *"I don't have labour to trade it back. If I go and help them build a house, then they would come and help me build a house"*. If one of their relatives is building a house both husband and wife would go. If they are not relatives, mostly husbands or men go on behalf of the family. This kind of labour trade happens less in Village Two.

Most of the participants in Village Two tend to help relatives and people from their former village. From a social capital perspective, labour trade occurs among extended family members or group members because of bonding social capital. Bonding social

capital is formed among people with similar socio-economic backgrounds. The ingredients of bonding social capital are inherent in the social system. Family members or friends with similar cultural or religious backgrounds have strong social bondage. Bridging social capital on the other hand is formed among people from a wide variety of groups and unlike bonding social capital needs a program/policy intervention for its formation. Village Two host people from different backgrounds as a result of the resettlement program. The pattern of labour trade provides evidence of a lack of bridging social capital.

- ***Socialising in community***

Weddings and house construction are the kind of activities that provide the community opportunities to have fun and work together as a group. WV1SE said *“I prefer going to weddings because there are many people and we talk and people tell us something”*. WV1Y said *“to eat and be together and have fun together”*. They do not seem to choose who should go, in fact both husband and wife take part and enjoy themselves with their friends. Usually all the men socialise in a group of men and women in a group of women. However, in Village Two people do not like to socialise with other groups relocated to the same village because they have not yet adjusted to living with them. Because of the high bonding social capital among their own group, they are not ready to make an effort to get along with others.

- ***Material benefit from projects***

Women interviewed in both villages agreed that incentives motivate them to participate in the project activities. They make attending project activities more attractive. When asking about different activities, most women interviewed can only recall the activities from which they gain material benefits. For example, the benefits included a new school building, water systems, livestock (goats), seeds, rice, school supplies, soap, condoms and money. It also appears that women are interested in being involved with projects that address their needs or concerns. For example, a woman in Village One who has sick children attends many mother and child training sessions. She is keen to participate and can remember the activities well. Incentives encourage women to be active in attending activities and speaking in the meetings. However, there is a danger that when participation becomes associated with incentives the participants become dependent.

WV1SE said *“every time they come for a meeting they always ask for brave women to raise their hands and answer questions and then they will receive a gift. I speak in the meeting when staff come to give the rice for poor families. I told them that my family is poor and then they give rice to me. WV2C also said for the “HIV/AIDS project. They ask questions and we answer. Yes I did and I won a prize, soap and sweets”*. Project staff brought school bags to distribute to students at school. As soon as the project team arrived, many women ran to see what staff had brought (25 February, 2010, Village One).

- ***Financial penalties***

Another motivation for participation in the project activities is to fine those who do not attend unless they have a good reason to miss the activity. It is a regulation set up by the Village Committee under guidance from the district Government. The fee is between 20-30,000 Kip each time. However, it depends on the agreement in each village as to how much money should be charged and the importance of the meeting. WV1ST said *“If we don’t go to the meeting they will come and collect money for the fee. It is 20,000 Kip per day”*. WV2P said *“If I don’t come to the meeting I have to pay 25,000 Kip”*. Women usually go on the husbands behalf if he is not available, to avoid being charged. The rule of charging people does not seem to be clear. WV2C said *“sometimes they don’t charge. Sometimes they do. If someone is sick they do not have to pay but if people just miss it then they have to pay”*.

#### **5.6.6. *Participation and leadership***

For women there are formal and informal leaders. Formal leaders are limited to the Lao Women’s Union (LWU) representative and the school teacher. Informal women leaders are either associated with the Village Committee or those who are wealthy and have access to resources and influence in the village. In most situations leaders are both wealthy and have political connection.

○ *The Lao Women's Union at village level*

The LWU is an official organisation that exists within the village administrative structure. It is the only Government body whose main role and responsibility is to engage women in the development process. The LWU is in a good position to have access to women. They are able to call women to a particular meeting when there is a need and if she is capable of attending. All women interviewed said they know their village has the LWU. Even where the interviewee did not know who the representative was, they knew that this body exists. The LWU is respected by the community. When the LWU representative goes to collect rice from each household, people give it to her. The LWU representative is appointed by the district LWU with the support of the Village Committee and community. According to the village headman, the LWU representative should be able to read and write. Most importantly they should have time to help him when he assigns them with a job. The LWU representative reports to both the district LWU and village headman on issues related to women in the village; assist the village headman and the district LWU in development work such as encouraging women to attend project activities; also help WVL staff to cook and clean up while working in the village. This is part of being a good host.

In Village Two, the LWU has four people on the committee and about 60 members. These members are divided into six different groups and each group has a leader. The village LWU representative has a meeting every month for collecting the membership fee (100 Kip per month) and feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of the team. To be a member of the LWU, a woman has to be aged between 15 and 45. These members have to be accepted by the district LWU. Members are expected to be good examples for other women and children in the village in terms of being a good Lao women and being active in the development process. However, in Village One the representative is new to the position and does not know much about her role and responsibilities apart from doing what the village head man tells her to do. She said that the district LWU and previous leader have not given her any direction as to what they expect her to do. The LWU representatives in both villages do not appear to take on the roles and responsibilities stated in the official LWU job description provided to them. For example to attend

meetings with the Village Committee and represent women's concerns. It is not clear which type of training the LWU in Village Two received. Two types of training are available, one is gender training and the other is about the roles and responsibilities of the LWU. In the communities studied LWU representatives cook and clean but do not take on the other roles and responsibilities of the LWU.

- *Informal women leaders*

Informal leaders are not appointed. They just take up their roles naturally. Often staff use them to encourage women to talk in group discussions. It appears that informal women leaders in both villages have access to resources. For example, their houses and land are of good quality and in a good location. Being a Village Committee member, particularly a village headman, provides men with influence, access to resources and finance. For women, these resources come through their husbands. This means that they do not have to work as hard as women in poor households. The women themselves recognise this.

In addition, most informal leaders in the two villages have inherited resources (land, money and livestock) and are better off. They also have more connections than ordinary women which helps them gain access to resources easier. For example if their husbands or relatives are village headmen, they have better connections with other people inside and outside of community. Most informal women leaders in the two villages have at least three or four good pieces of agricultural land close to their houses. The Village Committee's houses are also located along the road and easily accessible. This provides them with additional livelihood opportunities, such as a small shop to sell their products. They own rice mills and they have many livestock such as cows and goats. In contrast, poor people have land far from their homes and often it is low quality. Most of their houses are at the back of the village.

Informal women leaders in the two villages tend to be people of an older age. Although they do not have a high level of education as male leaders do, they can speak Lao fluently and are not shy to talk to staff or strangers. For example, in Village One, the headman's wife, shop owners and other wealthy people act as informal leaders. Completing primary



school does not automatically mean you are a leader. Many young women have this formal education but still do not have influence in the community. Informal leaders have many friends, and people take notice of them. They are confident to participate in meetings. WV2C said *“I can answer the questions which staff ask during meetings because I am smart”*. Informal leaders are the sort of people that are active in community activities such as organising weddings and encouraging women to take part in village activities. They also have opportunities to travel to other places outside the village and make connections whereas poor women do not have these opportunities.

In one interview an informal woman leader said that she and her husband do everything together. They share the housework as well as the farm work. They do not divide jobs but whoever is available does what is required. From observations, the husbands of informal leaders also cook and do the housework and prepare blankets for visitors, which is different from other houses (March, 2 & 15, Village One, Village Two). However, it is still primary the husbands' role to attend training provided by the project.

Although informal leaders said that they do not participate in project activities that much, they are aware of them. They also have a good general knowledge about community activities. Informal women leader's roles are indirectly related to project activities. For example project staff often come to stay overnight at their houses and they overhear discussions between staff and their husbands. They cook and clean for staff which is a similar job as formal women leaders (the LWU) do. Both formal and informal women leaders prefer to relate to female staff. Formal and informal leaders tend to have an influence on women while male leaders have influence on both men and women in their household and community. When men/husbands are unhealthy then women/wives take the leadership role in the household.

## 5.7. The barriers to participation in the project

In this study nine barriers of women's participation in development activities were identified. The study also presents three short stories of women to elaborate on these barriers. The names used are not the respondents' real names.

### 5.7.1. *Language*

Khmu language is used in the internal meetings organised by the community themselves. However, the Lao language is used during meetings and activities with Government or project staff. Lao is taught in school and all text books are written in the language. However, when students have a difficulty understanding lessons, teachers translate into Khmu for them. Unfortunately not all teachers are Khmu so some students miss out. Outside of the classroom students only speak Khmu. The Lao language is not used on a daily basis in the community, although many Lao words are now part of the Khmu language. Opportunities to communicate in Lao are limited, particularly for more isolated households in Village Two who do not come into contact with Lao-Tai people. Many of the women interviewed claim that they understand Lao but they do not have a full understanding. WV2H said *"some parts I do understand but some part I don't"*. Although many women interviewed in both villages understand Lao quite well, many of them particularly in Village Two struggle to express themselves clearly. They cannot construct complicated sentences. Box 4 shows the problem of not being able to speak the Lao language. Often staff must guess what they are trying to say. For example, WV1M tried to say that she was pregnant and that is why she cannot work as hard as she used to. In Lao language she said *"I have a stomach problem"*. I asked her to explain what kind of problem. Then she explained *"stomach of a child"*. When asked if she was pregnant she said *"yes"*. The women interviewed appeared even shyer when expected to speak in Lao. Many women interviewed in Village Two preferred to respond in Khmu. WV1M said *"I am Lao Thung (another name for Khmu) so I feel like talking in Khmu is better"*. Women appear to find talking to outsiders difficult enough and it is worse if they have to use a language that they are not comfortable with.

### 5.7.2. *Cultural norms: limited female participation*

The village headman refers to the head or the representative of each family when he calls meetings. In the Khmu village a man is the head of the family and he is expected to attend meetings. Women come to meetings or attend project activities only if her husband cannot attend. Both men and women in the two villages agree that meetings are men's job. For this reason women cannot take an active role in development activities. Men do not believe women can do this job and it is not necessary to involve them in these activities. This is evident in V1H2's comment *"Mostly the man goes. She doesn't understand the work. She doesn't remember. When she comes home from the meetings, I asked her and she says that people talk too much and I don't understand and I can't remember anything"*. V2H3 added *"after the meeting I told my wife about this and that it relates specifically to women, I told her but if not then I told her in general."*

Another cultural norm associated with being a good woman in these two Khmu villages is not to travel far from home alone. Women are expected to work hard on the farm and make sure the family has food to eat. This is what it means to be a good woman or wife. WV1M said *"We should do farming so that we have enough food to eat"*. Being outside of the home earning money is men's job and it is not appropriate for women. WV2L said, *"Earning money far away from home is difficult for the family. We have housework and children to take care of. Women have to be at home and men go to work"*. This suggests that attending project activities or doing other

#### **Box 4: Mee's Story**

Mee lives in a very small and poor house with her husband and three young children. The house does not have electricity. The house has only one room where she sleeps and cooks. She has a small household garden at the back of the house. She is now expecting a baby. Because of this she cannot work as hard as her husband and she feels like she is lazy. Her husband is always out for hunting and fishing.

Mee completed grade four. Her mother asked her to drop out of school to help with the work and taking care of the siblings. She is very shy. She understands Lao language but cannot speak. She tries to speak Lao to Lao people but feels constrained in terms of communicating her thought. She does not attend any project activity because she is poor and the village committee does not allow her to be involved in any microfinance activity because she is poor and it is a risk to be able to pay back. She hardly participates in community activity. She only associates with her cousin and other poor neighbour's.

work outside of home does not benefit a woman's position but is an additional burden. When women do a good job in the household and on the farm then they are accepted by her family and community.

### 5.7.3. **Workload**

It appears women do not really have much time left to do things other than their normal routine. However, it seems not to be the case for men. From my observations, Village One and Two are similar in terms of sharing the workload between men and women. Women get up at around four in the morning. As soon as they get up, they start with the work they need to do every day, including cooking, cleaning, collecting water and feeding children and animals. By 6:30am they start walking to the farm and return home before 6:00pm to repeat the housework as they did in the morning. At eight o'clock in the evening before going to bed they soak the rice for the next day's cooking. However, men sometimes go to look for fish at night with friends. Men seem to have time walking around and socialising with other people in the village in the morning and the evening. Women on the other hand seem very busy around this time.

If there is nobody at home to look after children, women cannot go to meetings. Some women take children with them to meetings and often they go to meetings late and sit at the back of the room. When the children cry they have to go out. WV1D said *"If we go late because we have a baby and they start the meeting first then we miss out"*. Women are not able to catch up with what has been said. Everywhere women go they carry children on their backs when they are in the meeting, cooking, cleaning, washing, and feeding animals (March 5-9, 2010, Village One & March 15-19, 2010, Village Two). I have not seen women walk without their children. All women interviewed have children with them and work while being interviewed. Many times I had to stop the interview and wait because the children cry (see Figure 15). Women could not even focus fully on the interview. However, men do not experience these problems and were able to focus on the interview. Involving women in the project activities or in meetings means disturbing her work, which husbands do not allow. VHM2 said:

*It is difficult because if I go to the meeting and she also goes then no one is at home to care and cook for the family. For example, if we both go and children also go to school then no one is at home. When staff come to work in the village then would be no one to take care of them and cook for them.*



Figure 15: Women with children and housework

It appears that a woman with a young child has fewer opportunities to be involved in the Village Committee. A former Lao Women's Union (LWU) representative in Village One (WV1D) said:

*After I got married I resigned from the LWU. When I had a child I didn't attend meetings with them and when there was person to replace then I let them do it. When I had a child I didn't get to go like when I didn't have a child. When I didn't have a child, they order me to do the work then I do it, but when I have a child I mostly don't go.*

For this reason the village headman in Village One chose a young, single woman to be the LWU representative because she has the time to do the work even though she is not the most experienced woman.

The time of the meeting is also important for women who attend. Many women find it difficult to attend meetings in the evening. WV1Y said *“I am tired and sleepy”*, while WV2S said *“Morning is the best time because I have children. My children cry a lot. He always cries at night because he is sleepy and wants mother to take care of him”*. WV1L said *“Night time is not convenient but afternoon is good. At night no one wants to go. If we tell them the day before or in the morning then they can wait”*

#### 5.7.4. **Education**

Education is one of the criteria for being accepted to the Village Committee you must at least be able to read and write. However, this criterion limits opportunities for women to take part in leadership in the community. The majority of older women only completed grade two and so they are not able to read and write. Some of them never attended school at all. The lack of formal education among the older generation makes women reluctant to sign up for project activities that involve paperwork such as the Village Fund. Although women are often responsible for implementing activities such as growing crops, many do not attend project trainings or have direct responsibility for finances. Most young women interviewed had completed primary school (grade five). However, these young women do not have power. They are not recognised by the community or their husbands regarding their involvement in the development activities or leadership in the community.

Poverty appears to be one of the main reason preventing women attending school.

Women interviewed in the two villages have to help their family work on the farm due to a shortage of labour. For the oldest daughter, she has more responsibility to help her mother to take care of younger siblings. WV2P said *“I didn’t go to school. I don’t know any letters. I have many brothers and sisters, my father passed away, so no one took care of my brothers and sisters. I am the eldest”*. Moreover, distance from school also appears

to limit girl's attendance at school. WV2C said *"It is cold during the winter and school is far away, we have to walk a long distance"*. The reason younger women do not have higher education is they are expected to be married and then look after the in-laws.

The perception of women and education also affects opportunities for women to be involved in development activities. Most of the women interviewed prefer to invest in their son's education for various reasons. First, they perceive boys can have a job, for example being a teacher. Secondly, boys are considered good at studying and not lazy like girls (women see girls drop out of school in the past and for this reason they are perceived as being lazy). Some women interviewed, particularly in Village Two, perceived girls as lazy in academic work but they are diligent in working on the farm. They appear not to have hopes for their daughter's education, particularly education beyond primary school. WV2S said *"Son...because he has a brain. Lao Thung daughters are lazy to go to school. If doing farming then daughters are good. Unlike Lao Loum boy's who are good at going to school, but lazy to go to the farm"*. WV2SH said *"If she is not lazy then she can continue. It is up to them if they are lazy then I don't know what to do"*. However, some thought being able to read and write is good enough for them.

Interestingly, when it comes to choosing the sex of children, all women interviewed prefer to have daughters. A daughter appears to be a person that rescues and shares mothers from the workload that they have to do. WV1M said *"I am going to be happy if I have a daughter"*. WV1D added *"boys, when they grow up they are not useful because they are lazy. Girls collect firewood and vegetables. They steam rice. They can help us"*. This reflects on how parents teach their children. It appears that parents teach and expect their sons and daughters to do different jobs. For example, one WV2C said:

*Son, we teach him differently and daughter we teach her differently. For son we teach him to do a heavy work and women to do lighter jobs such as steam rice and collect firewood. Now we don't pound the rice. Men, we teach them to look for food and fish and to study hard.*

#### 5.7.5. **Health**

Health issues are another set of problems that prevent women from taking part in project activities. Their lack of participation has to do with their health and that of their children. The women interviewed in Village Two appear to have more health problems than those in Village One. Many of them cannot attend project meetings because their children are sick. WV1Y said *“When children are sick I have to stay at home. I can’t go to the farm or the meeting. My children get sick every two or three days. The child that I am holding now is sick”*. Box 5 describes the case of the death of a child when the father was a way.

Furthermore, many women in Village Two are still struggling with their own health issues and pregnancy, which limits their participation in project activities. WV2S said *“Before I was sick I can, but now I can’t because I have little children and I am also sick. When we moved here I was pregnant and I was very skinny. I nearly died. I can’t eat all kinds of food, just fish and some kinds of vegetables. I can’t eat many things. I can eat only salt and rice”*.

#### **Box 5: Na’s Story**

Na lives in small house, made of bamboo and grass, with her husband and two young children. She completed school at grade two. She was sick and had to stop school. She is fluent in the Lao language and has a chance to travel outside of the village with her cousin. She attends the meeting and project activity when her husband is not at home. Her husband likes to stay in the farm and send some food home. She actively attends the activity that focus on health and sanitation and women when her children are not sick. She often has to stay home and take care of sick children. When one of her children died, the husband did not know. She and her cousin had to bury the child without him.

Health issues are not only preventing women from taking part in the project activities, but also affecting their self-esteem. These women seem to depend more on their husbands and do not believe that they can contribute either to the community or project activities. WV2S said *“I don’t know it is up to him, maybe rice or sesame. I don’t go. I just stay at home being lazy”*. This makes women have low self-esteem about themselves and do not want to take any responsibility other than their duties at home such as housework and taking care of children.



#### 5.7.6. ***Resettlement and poverty issues***

Resettlement is where a group of people are moved from one place to settle in another place. In Laos, often it is the result of large infrastructure projects, plantations, development and government programs. In this study Village Two was resettled from upland areas to a new settlement along the main road on the instruction of the Lao Government. Three communities were combined in a new settlement. One of the challenges is that relationships are changed and broken in the process of resettlement. People find it difficult to trust other community members. Even though Village Two is a Khmu village, each of the three communities has its own traditions and way of doing things. This makes it difficult for the village leaders to please everyone. It appears that the group with the majority of people have the most influence. The minority has to try to fit into the new environment. Although resettlement improves the road access to the social services, people lost social capital or networks that they already had in their old village. When one group organise activities, the other group do not like to support them or get involved. This makes it difficult to ensure participation and contribution of different groups of people in community and project activities. It also prevents them sharing information. For example, one woman in Village Two explained that they do not talk to each other as they should do.

As a result of resettlement women have less time staying in the village and therefore fewer opportunities to participate in development activities. Many women stay overnight on their farms. WV2C said *“Women normally stay overnight on the farm because it is far but some men they travel back and forth”*. Even though people do not stay overnight at the farm, they still have a habit of keeping all their property at the farm. This also keeps women from attending project activities. WV2L said *“sometimes we do not have rice at home we have to go to get rice at the farm [and so miss the meeting]”*.

Furthermore, poverty forces people to work harder and so they do not have spare time available. It appears that the only thing that poor people concern themselves with every day is looking for food to eat. They do not to have long-term plans. HV2 said:

*Some people's response is that if you don't let people go to work in the farm while the village has a meeting or a project activity who will pay our tax to the Government. This is not only happening in this village, it happens in all villages. For example, if we have a meeting today and the next day it is time to pay tax they refuse to pay and say that if people do not have meetings with us for 4 or 5 days we would have looked for money about 10,000 or 20,000 Kip.*

He also added that in Village Two if the meetings take all day long, the community is not happy. In Village One, everyone has a farm nearby and most of them use a motorbike for transport. They do not have to walk to the farm (March 7, 2010, Village One). These people seem to be available to attend the project activities, whereas people from Village Two must walk a long distance to their farms and are seldom at home and available for project activities.

#### **5.7.7. *Women's self esteem***

The majority of women interviewed in the two villages appear to have low self esteem when compared with their men/husbands. Women believe that they only have the knowledge and capability to do farming and housework which they call "light work". They do not appear to realise their important role in supplying food for the family. When asked about who looks for food in the family most of the women interviewed immediately said their husbands look for food. Only few women said both men and women look for food. WV1Y said *"I don't look for anything, just look for crabs, vegetables and collect banana flowers"*. They feel that their jobs have less value than men's. This is because men can look for fish and meat. WV1H said *"Men are better than women because men can look for meat but women can't. Women do not know how to dig a hole for squirrels. Only men do. We can do nothing. Men can do all things"*.

Even though women seem to keep themselves busy with the farm work and the housework they still think that they are lazy. They believe that they are only better than men at gardening. While collecting vegetables with a group of women in Village Two,

WV2L said *“People said that we are lazy, but we work all the time when there is work to do. Maybe we are lazy I don’t know”*. Furthermore, interviewees think that they do less than men because they cannot carry heavy things like men do. It is a belief among many women that they cannot be equal with men. WV2L said *“As women we are the deputy (second). We are not men. Men have more right than women”*.

In addition, they perceive men as the leaders in the family. Men can lead to improve the family’s livelihood. As a leader or the head of the family, men have the right to manage the wife and children. WV1D said *“Men are good that is why they are the leaders of the family. They lead us to improve life. He manages the family”*.

The women interviewed also believe that men should have more honour and that men want to have more respect. The majority of women interviewed trust their husband for everything that he does. WV1H said *“Whatever he said, it is true”*. It appears to those women that there is only one thing that men cannot do, which is pounding and husking rice.

There were some young respondents who completed grade five, and have contact with outsiders. They believe that men and women can work equally well. What men can do women can also do. This includes the ‘heavy work’. In fact they believe that they do more work than men. Although men can do everything, men tend not to do it. For example, women do not trust men in doing household chores such as soaking and steaming rice. WV2A said *“Men only farm and after that they just come home and eat and sleep. The rest women do”*. WV2SH added *“Man does not help me do the housework*

#### **Box 6: Ket’s Story**

Ket married an old man. They live in a very small poor house and the house hardly has anything. They have five children. One daughter just married and moved out. Another daughter has a mental health problem. Ket’s husband is not healthy so he cannot do a lot of work. She makes all decisions at home and is responsible for everyone at home. She never attended school. She spends more time on the farm than in the house. She comes home just to bring food for their children who go to school. Her sister who lives next door looks after the children. She rarely attends project activities. She feels that she is poor and people do not include her in any activity because she has nothing to contribute. She is ashamed to be poor and that her husband is not like other husbands. She has withdrawn herself from people in the community.

*but I help him do everything in the farm for example, weeding, taking rice seed and carry rice bags”.*

Poor women in both villages also have lower self-esteem than the rich women. This limits their participation in project activities. They appear to look down on themselves. They do not socialize with the rest of the community. They tend to get together with poor families. They do not take part either in both community or project activities. They are shy because they see themselves as not being like other people. They perceive that other people also look down on them and do not want to be involved in any activities. Box 6 demonstrates how poverty and lack self-esteem effect women’s participation. WV2P said:

*They say I am poor. I don’t need to be involved with them. I also don’t go because I am shy. I stay at home looking for food. I don’t contribute anything because I don’t have anything. If you are poor they don’t call you, they don’t deal with you. I don’t talk to rich people. I am shy and they don’t care about me.*

#### **5.7.8. Staff and project approach**

Generally Khmu women are shy so they do not talk to visitors or strangers, particularly men. It appears that many staff are still considered visitors because they only visit the village for a limited time, approximately one day per month for each village. Community members are not familiar with staff. Moreover, some project activities that interest women, such as agriculture have fewer female staff involved and some project teams do not have any women members. S1AB said *“in agriculture, our teams do not have women”*. However, the women interviewed in both villages prefer to work with female staff. WV1Y said *“I prefer to work with women. Because the way they tell me is very good. Whereas the men I do not understand”*. WV2A claimed that the reason she was not interested in going to project meetings was because of staff. She said *“I am lazy to go Staff always talk about the same things. I don’t want to go”*. This situation also relates to women who said they cannot remember about the issues that have been discussed in the meeting because people talk too much.

The official conditions for being involved in some project activities such as the Animal Bank and the Village Fund, do not leave room for poor women to participate. WV2P said *“They said I cannot borrow because I am poor. I tell you the truth. I heard many people receive pigs and goats, they also get money, but only rich people get. If they let me be a member I would be a member”*. WV1M added *“They don’t let poor people borrow. They are afraid that I cannot pay it back”*. Furthermore, the quality or the outcome of the project activity is also influenced by female participation. In Village Two, women see their involvement in project activities such as the Animal Bank as a risk. Many animals die while being raised. WV2SH said *“I don’t want to be involved because I don’t want to be in debt. I saw some people are involved in the Animal Bank but they end up with debt. I don’t want to be involved in that”*. WV2A said *“it does not work. The project provides animals but many people do not want it”*.

#### 5.7.9. ***Access to project activity and control over assets***

##### ○ ***Control over assets***

For the women interviewed ownership was defined as ownership of their house. Most women interviewed in both villages claim that their house belonged to them even though their name did not appear on the legal document. This is the same case for land. Women work on the farm and they believe that the land belongs to them. However, some of the women interviewed do not know whose name is on the land title. Many women said that their land is under their husband’s name. They believe that both house and land should be under the name of the head of the family. For many women when they receive inheritance such as a house and land they transfer the right of ownership to their husband. WV1D said *“After my mother gives the land to me I will put my husband’s name on it because he manages the house”*. WV1H added that *“As we live together not only the land and house but all other things should be under my husband’s name because the husband is in control”*. Furthermore, all women interviewed are responsible for looking after money but do not decide how to spend it. WV2C said *“My husband would tell me what to pay for”*.

- *Access to project activity*

Most of the project activities such as the Animal Bank and Village Fund are managed by men (the head of the family). Like other resources women can only have access through their husband. For example, each family uses the name of the head of the family to be a member of the Village Fund. For this reason many women put men before them. Women believe they are deputy (second) so they appear to have access to the project activities only when their husband is not available. As a result, women cannot participate in project activities even though they might want to.

Even though the two villages are different, both villages face similar barriers to participation in development projects. However, women in Village Two face more difficulties related to their recent resettlement. More time is required to access their farms, which limits time spent at home and available for project activities. Project staff rarely observe women stay overnight in the village because usually they stay and work at their farms. Women are the providers for their families and have to look for food for the family.

## **5.8. Overcoming barriers to participate**

Women appear to be able to overcome many barriers to participate in community activities such as weddings and funerals. It is acceptable for women to attend and the family support them. For example, grandparents would take care of grandchildren and allow both husband and wife to attend the activities. However, women do not seem as keen to participate in project activities. They accept their position and do not seem to make an effort to overcome the barriers they face. The family does not appear to support women to be involved in project activities. The only project activities women are usually allowed to attend include gender training and mother and child activities. For the community, these topics are considered as women's activities and both men and women accept women's participation.

Even though women do not have access to information provided by the project directly, many women receive information through their husbands, friends and relations. This is an important aspect of the social network and informal sharing within the community. After work, when women have more free time, they like to get together in small groups in front of a house. Most often they talk about farming and share news of what happening in the village (Figure 16). When they do not understand what has been said in a meeting they usually ask close friends. Women also talk and share lesson while walking together to their farms.



Figure 16: Women get together and share stories

## 5.9. Conclusion

The word ‘participation’ is not known among the women interviewed. There is no Khmu word for ‘participation’. However, men and staff understand the word ‘participation’ differently. Even though women lack understanding about participation, they face many barriers for them to be involved in project activities. Roles of women in project activities are limited to traditional roles such as cooking and serving. Even women leaders when required revert back to these roles. Staff play both explicit and implicit roles in the project activities. The most effective role for staff in improving women’s participation is the role model. However, the least effective role is the teacher role where staff direct the activities. Out of the approaches staff use to encourage women’s participation, women prefer to speak their own language and with females staff.

## Chapter Six: Discussion

### 6.1. Introduction

This chapter addresses the aim of this study, to explore Khmu women's participation in community development projects in Luang Prabang Province, Lao PDR. The results are discussed in relation to the research questions:

- *Do women experience barriers to participating in project activities?*
  - a. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community?
  - b. What are the barriers for Khmu women to participate in the development project?
  - c. How do they overcome these barriers?
- *What is the role of development partners and related government agencies in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects?*

In this Chapter, Section 6.2 looks at how staff and community interpret '*participation*'. Section 6.3 discusses the roles of women in the community, households and development projects. Section 6.4 discusses women's barriers to participation. This is followed by a discussion on how women overcome these barriers in Section 6.5. Sections 6.6 and 6.7 look at the roles of project staff and then the methods they use to increase participation.

### 6.2. Interpreting participation

The term participation has many meanings. It is a western concept, and this is where the word participation comes from. This influences the way development organisations design, plan and implement activities. The way different groups of people interpret participation influences their relationships. Participation may be different in the family, community and project where an individual plays different roles. To understand how people see participation in development projects, this study looks at participation in family, household, community and development projects. This study found different Lao words for participation, see Table 6.



Table 6: Summarized view of participation from the field work

Definition of Participation <i>'Khan Mee Soun Houm'</i> (ການມີສ່ວນຮ່ວມ).		Practical example	
Lao	English	Staff	Community
ສາມັກຄີ Samaky	Sharing, helping and harmony and maintain peace	Following village culture to reach project goals and build good relationships.	Sharing food and help each other building a house
ການປະກອບສ່ວນ Khan Pa Kop Soun	Contribution	Community contributes money to village bank and labour to build school and food to staff during village visit	Community contribute labour to build village hall and cooked rice for village visitors
ການຮ່ວມມື Khan Houm Meu	Cooperation	Supports from district and community to the project activity	Community is waiting to work and be ready for the project team
ການເຮັດວຽກຮ່ວມກັນ Khan Het Vek Houm Khan	Working as a group	Everyone in the office helps and supports each other. A group of people is responsible for animal raising	Community clean village hall and water area
ອອກຄໍາຄິດຄໍາເຫັນ Ouk Kham Kit Kham Hen	Sharing opinion	Men and women share opinion in the meeting	Village headman speaks for community on their behalf

None of the informants provided a word for participation in the Khmu language. There is no direct translation in Lao language either. All staff and men on Village Committees were able to provide their interpretation of participation, whereas few women could. This has implications for how they participate. Men who were away from home may have different perceptions of participation. A report by ADB (2009) showed that migration changes social structures and people's perceptions change. Both migration and resettlement raise similar issues, including new environments, new people and relationships. The staff definition of participation corresponds with that of prominent authors in the literature such as Chambers (2005). However, the definition is not consistent with the World Vision Laos, National Gender and Development Strategy 2008-

2012 (WVL, 2007) or the LWU's study (GRID, 2005). This study found the official expectations of WVL (see Section 3.2.1) and the Lao Government (Section 3.4.1) on participation is extremely high relative to staff and community perceptions of the term.

The extent to which people are aware of the meaning of participation reflects their involvement in project activities. In the Lao context, staff and the community understand the idea of participation mainly in material terms, for example labour, rice and money. In other words working together, sharing and supporting each other. This definition of participation is consistent with what Chambers (2005), describes as '*consultation*' or level two of his definition of participation. It is a degree of tokenism according to the Arnstein (1969) ladder of participation which is used by WVL (WVL, 2009). Although most staff are brought up in the city, Laos remains a community oriented society and they understand communities. However, each community and ethnic group is different.

Although staff receive training from the INGO's perspective of participation, they continue to practice their traditional idea of participation with which they are familiar from their own community. Awareness about local perspectives is crucial for WVL staff. For example, contribution, cooperation and working as a group. In other words, participation to the project staff is all but sharing opinion which is the lowest of priorities among the four components of participation (Table 6). Although the Lao Government defines participation as 'decision making' (ERISTEA, n.d.), this study revealed that participation is understood differently both by Khmu and development staff. It does not matter what the definition and expectation of the development organisation are regarding participation, if the staff who have direct contact with the community do not understand or agree with their expectations. This is because the western concept of participation is new to them as well. Participation and the goals of the project may not be achieved especially when this concept of participation does not exist in the culture. By understanding the role of individuals in the community and household we can begin to understand their participation and contribution to development projects. Although those interviewed do not represent the whole community, they do reveal the perceptions of

participation among the community and the type of barriers women face to participation in development projects.

Three parties are trying to engage in a development project. Each has a different knowledge base and perspective of participation: planners of development projects have a broad and inclusive view of women's participation; development staff being new to the concept themselves, but willing to embrace the broad view; and village people with very limited knowledge about women's participation.

### **6.3. Women's roles**

Evaluating the role of women within Khmu communities is one of the purposes of this study. Women's roles in the rural community can be divided into their participation in family, community activities and development projects. Family and community roles are learnt from childhood. Boys and girls are brought up differently. Women are expected to be told what to do; men are expected to tell their wives what to do. These are informal roles. For Khmu culture respect for authority is an unwritten rule. Relationships between Government and ethnic groups and between rural and urban people are shaped by culture.

In project activities women remain in their traditional family or community roles. They are serving, following and informing. Attending project activities is considered a very formal and public role. This is not a traditional role for women in Khmu communities. The results are consistent with the literature review (GRID, 2005), where men take part in meetings on behalf of the household. The relationship between staff and community is important for project activities. As we see in the study, women prefer to talk to female staff. This reflects the cultural norms observed in Khmu communities, where men and women get together in separate groups. For example during weddings, funerals and festivals men and women work in separate groups to achieve their tasks.

In the context of project activities, it is unlikely that women will participate in roles outside their traditional ones in the household or community. It may help if their roles are

formalised. This is observed by the fact that wives of village headmen, female teachers, and the LWU representatives take important and more formal roles within the community. However, female teachers and the LWU representatives revert back to their traditional roles such as boiling water and serving when project staff and other visitors come to visit. For women to participate in development projects, both men and women require to have formal roles. They should also be clear about what participation actually means in practical terms. Although men are not the focus of this study, it was observed that they often take on facilitator and follower roles when participating in project activities. If women are seen as lower or subordinate, and men are always more superior (important) then it does not leave women room to take on leadership roles. For example, cooking is a traditional role for women and when the project organises related activities more women attend. This corresponds with IFE's (2002) findings that people will participate when they feel the topic is important and relevant to them.

Although activities such as animal raising are considered traditional roles for women, if project or Government staff are involved they are interpreted as a formal activities for which men are responsible. This is also identified in GRID's (2005) study that found that men are usually responsible for official activities such as microcredit. In this context women do not see the need to participate in these activities. It places a lot of responsibility on the men that attend the training to pass the information on to women. This study found women are not interested in listening to their husbands about meetings because they do not see this as part of their role. Furthermore, men do not seem very good or keen to tell their wives about what they have learnt. Nevertheless, project information could benefit both women and the rest of the household if they are aware of project activities, such as project funding.

#### **6.4. The barriers to participate in project activity**

The purpose of this study is to identify the barriers to women's participation in development activities. In the context of the Khmu community and rural development in general barriers are often institutional or cultural. For example, formal access to land may

be decided by a piece of paper. This study looks at the dynamics of female participation in all components of their lives. In particular we analyse their participation in project activities relative to their role in the family and community activities. The structure of the discussion chapter is similar to the results. Sections are based on the original research question. Table 7 provides a summary of barriers faced by Khmu women to participation identified in the research.

Table 7: Summary of barriers to participation in projects faced by Khmu women

Barrier	Example
Language	Staff do not speak Khmu language Khmu understand Lao but do not speak Lao Translation is used to solve problems and by Government staff and the village headman
Cultural norm	Men are leaders Women are not allowed to work at night or travel far from home
Workload	Women are occupied with housework and taking care of children
Education	Is considered as formal activity, only men are involved Women's low education level keep them from leadership roles
Health	Women suffer from their own and their children's health issues
Resettlement issue	New home is far from farms, less time at home Community members do not get along
Poverty	Work hard and less time for project activities Isolated from project activities and other community members
Women's self esteem	Women consider themselves less important than men, they withdraw from project activities Believe their jobs are light Perceived as being lazy by the Lao society
Staff and project approach	Staff have less time interacting with community particularly with the poor families WVL staff cannot speak the same language as community Less female staff Gender training is considered as women's responsibility
Village administrative structure	Hierarchy, mostly men are in leadership positions WVL staff assume Village LWU representatives cover women's issues
Access and control	Men have final say on large purchases Men hold a low value on women's work Women transfer inheritance rights to husbands Men sign all documents on behalf of household

#### 6.4.1. *Language*

This study highlighted the significance of language for communication and exchange of ideas. The importance of language is highlighted by the absence of the very word '*participation*' in Khmu language. Conversations with Khmu and many other ethnic groups have to be translated to and from Lao. For international development staff translations to and from Lao and English is also necessary. Hence, English-speaking staff receive information after two tiers of translation. With each translation, some of the meaning may be lost, particularly where no word exists in the Khmu or Lao language. This study shows that Lao is used as the main language in communicating with the Khmu community. This is a barrier to women who often do not have a full understanding of Lao. Many women do not have regular contact with outsiders or Lao speakers. Also, Khmu people are yet to have their own written language. The transaction costs are much higher for communication between three people groups with two distinctive linguistic roots. Difficulties in expressing themselves and a lack of confidence may lead to misunderstandings, a lack of exchange of knowledge and ideas and different outcomes than when a common language is shared. Staff do not seem to make the connection between language and participation, although WVL does have an official policy of using translators when working with ethnic women (WVL, 2007). This policy maybe overlooked in the field because staff find people that can speak some Lao. The study found that the majority of staff believe Lao and Khmu are similar and so the need to use a translation is not obvious to them. If the languages were totally different, there would be more motivation to employ a translator.

The study also highlighted that formal leaders and some Government staff speak Lao and often translate for project meetings. This is not a very neutral approach as it enforces existing hierarchies and allows the leader to control information and people. To be a good facilitator and empower poor people it helps to understand language differences. This has also been identified in the literature review (Vanuatu Cultural Centre, n.d.). It is difficult if the facilitator is someone from the Government or a Village Committee member. Often in this situation project staff are seen as outsiders too. Furthermore, Lao is the language of education. Clearly, the more Khmu girls that participate in education, the greater their

understanding of Lao which will help them participate in development projects and wider society. The motivation to learn Lao is greater for a minority if they want to participate in economic development (Kaufmann, 2007). Project staff do not gain any monetary benefit from learning the Khmu language. The amount of time spent with Khmu is not sufficient for them to learn the language properly either.

#### 6.4.2. *Cultural norms*

As explained in Section 5.3 women have clear traditional roles. They take direction from men, who are considered leaders in their culture. This is a clear cultural norm that is accepted by the community, family and women themselves. In the project context, this norm prevents them participating in certain activities. Even though the project staff perceive them as doing well, their own community might look down on them. For example, the woman whose husband is sick is acting outside of her cultural norm. She has to be the leader for her family but in public she is not respected. She does not feel good about herself because she is different from other women. However, project staff respect her. Another example is when staff organise project meetings in the evening. It is against the cultural norm for women to attend in the evening. The interviews revealed that only men attend formal and informal meetings held at night.

In the Khmu culture and history, the ideal leader is a man. Also, only men can be shamans and ritual practitioners (Vang, 2005). The LWU is the only leadership position that the community accepts for women which is a ‘*token*’ level of participation. This limits women’s opportunities in leadership. People do not trust female leaders. Leaders also require public speaking skills which women do not have an opportunity to practice. They are further constrained by their limited knowledge of the Lao language. As reported in the study by Karl (1995) girls are not encouraged to develop the self-confidence needed for public life. From this study, it can be concluded that both men and women identify their roles clearly. This is an important challenge to improving Khmu women’s participation in development projects. In addition, the roles of Khmu women may become rigid because poor people have to work hard to survive and have little free time and

resources. However, from the interviews Khmu women do not see their roles as rigid. Although they do not perceive their roles as rigid, they do not appear to have any motivation to change them. This appears to be the reason why the roles of Khmu men and women have not changed. This finding answers question in the literature regarding gender roles in Khmu community.

Cultural norms on gender related issues are passed on by example and stories. There are many Lao gender biased proverbs that have been used to teach women how to be good wives. For example '*Khong Kin Sap Hai Phoua Phieng Kin Kon, Phoua Phieng Kin Lea Mea Keo Ching Koi Kin*' which means that the wife should let the husband eat good food first and wife should eat after him. This proverb has an influence on how women treat their husbands and how the community expects women to behave today especially in rural areas. This proverb is also reinforced by the women and the community. The study found that women refuse to eat with their husbands when visitors are present.

#### 6.4.3. **Workload**

For women to participate in the project it might mean they cannot fulfil their duty at home or in the community because of their workload. From the investigation, it is clear that women have the burden of child rearing and farming. The role of women as the provider and subordinate (second) makes it difficult for them to be the leader even if they are given a formal role. For example, when the husband is not able to attend the meetings, to which it is compulsory for a representative of the family to go, it increases women's burden for them to attend. It means extra work that they must try to fit in their full day. In meetings, women have a hard time made worse when their young children cry. This study found that even though women attend meetings their mind is still thinking of their farm and what they can feed their family. For this reason many women cannot recall what has been discussing in meetings. This is one of the problems with what Karl (1995), refers to as 'quantitative participation'. Participation is often seen as always good. However, development should pay attention to 'qualitative participation', where it helps women improve the quality of their lives and to benefit from project activities. To enhance



women's participation, requires men to be able to share in women's workload as identified in the literature (AusAID, 1997).

#### 6.4.4. *Education*

The results of the study showed that education and project activities are seen as formal activities by both men and women. Both men and women express a preference to provide education for their male children compared to female children, as was revealed in the ADB's (2004) report. The respondents commented that education is part of preparation for men to be in formal activities either in the community or development project. For example, literate people, who normally are men, are selected to be VDC members. In the rural areas the percentage of boys attending school is also generally higher than girls (GRID, 2005). This presents a major barrier to the education and subsequent participation of girls in formal activities. For example, women have low education and poor language skill, both of which limit their participation in formal positions. In addition, it is a challenge for development partners who promote education as a means to increase participation because Khmu culture does not see the value or benefit of education. This is similar to the findings reported by Lewis (1992). The interviewees reveal that Khmu people value tangible benefits more than intangible benefits. For example parents are more appreciative of their sons bringing fish or food home, than doing well at school.

Tangible benefits motivate people to participate in school. The results show that project activities such as providing gifts (bags and school materials) to students who attend school encourage children to go to school and motivate parents to support them. This has been successful in WVL's project in the villages studied. Project staff also encourage parents to send their daughters to school. Education is a bridge to enable people to participate as it is in any society. That is why improved education is included in the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP, 2010a). WVL is in a good position to increase women's participation in development projects in the future as it invests in and focuses on children who will influence the community through their education, which according to the WVL's vision statement is "*our vision for every child, life in all its fullness. Our*

*prayer for every heart, the will to make it so*” (WVL, 2008). However, for this vision to be fully realised, the lack of women’s participation in WVL projects and the barriers they face must be addressed because women have such an important role in children’s welfare.

#### 6.4.5. **Health**

Health is one of the major barriers to participation. From the time women get married, pregnant and have children, their own health and that of their children is a major concern. Maternal and child mortality rates in Laos remain high. In 2005 the maternal mortality rate was 405 deaths per 100,000 live births; the under-five mortality rate was 98 per 1,000 live births; and the infant mortality rate was 70 per 1,000 live births (UNDP, 2008). Women who suffer from health issues depend more on their husbands, have less confidence and self-esteem. This investigation showed that women believe that they are weak and they look down on themselves and don’t have anything to contribute to development activities.

This research indicates that men do not appear to play an important role in family health, either in formal or informal roles. For example, two male respondents revealed that they were unaware of their child’s death because in Khmu culture, bodies are buried soon after death. When husbands are away from home they miss out on household affairs. Since women are primarily responsible for family health care, they play a critical role to ensure the welfare of their children. Women’s health problems prevent them attending the project activities. This means they miss out on benefits from the project, for example, health awareness training. This observation is similar to ADB’s (2004) findings. When children are not healthy, it is a challenge for WVL to achieve their vision which specifically focuses on the wellbeing of children (WVL, 2008). The problem is aggravated with women’s lack of control on financial matters. They do not have a formal role or assigned position to manage the family budget or its allocation for health. Neither are men the primary care takers so when allocating financial resources, health issues are not considered a priority for them.

In contrast to Lao-Tai, the Khmu community operates more as individual households. Also parents die of ill health at an earlier age. This means they are not available to share the workload. In Village Two and particularly in poor households, health is more of a barrier because they are more isolated and have less access to health services. Recent resettlement means there is no health infrastructure.

#### 6.4.6. *Resettlement*

Resettlement is often intended to enhance community participation. For example, the Lao Government's policy is to move distant communities to the road and closer to urban centres for administrative reasons (Evrard & Goudineau, 2004). Moving the community closer to the road side also makes it easier for WVL to run the project activities.

However, it does not appear to help women significantly. In Village Two, although the community has moved to the road, they have to walk further to access their land and resources which are the primary concern of women. While being on the roadside women still need to take care of their children. It has also increased workload on women in the farm and household, as reported in a study by Roberts & Rastogi (2006).

Although the Lao Government has implemented a resettlement program for the purpose of poverty reduction and development (Baird & Shoemaker, 2005), the findings in Village Two showed the situation is more complicated. Village Two has combined three villages. Even though the community is made up of the same ethnic group, people are still not able to get along with other people from different villages. It has been seven years since they were relocated. People remain reluctant to make an effort to live together in harmony. In fact, it makes the development process go very slowly because the communities do not trust each other. For example, the Village Fund in Village Two does not function well and women complain that they have lost money, while in Village One there does not appear to be any problem with the Village Fund. This finding resembles those of the ADB's (2004) study, which found that resettled villagers lost their capital too. Failing to address these issues restricts people's participation as reported in a study by UNESCAP (2009).

#### 6.4.7. **Poverty**

Poverty reduction is a core objective of development partners all over the world. WVL policy is to help poor people. This study found that people in the village are poor because they lack access to productive resources such as land and capital. Their situation is aggravated by a lack of infrastructure. For example, in Village Two their farms are further away from their homes and they have to walk because they lack transportation. Poorer families are in search of food most of the time. Getting involved in project activities implies a trade off with their search for food and survival of the whole family. Women are responsible for feeding the children and therefore find it difficult to rationalise participating in projects as revealed by Botes & Rensburg's (2000) study.

Even if the villagers show willingness to join in the project activities, their practical participation is likely to be restricted due to the lack of financial resources, or knowledge or skills. For example, in Village One, the Government asks villagers to grow more vegetables to sell and grow less rice. This means that they have to buy rice because they do not produce enough. At the end of the year, villagers are no better off. This study showed that once people have basic literacy, a lack of opportunities and resources to participate are the major barriers rather than education. The barriers poor people face to participate are greater than for rich people because poor people do not have time left to do other things. In order to help very poor people it takes much more support than normal poor people, to put them in a position where they are not exposed to an increased level of risk. It also means tangible benefits are essential to them and considered more important than intangible ones. As one of the interviewees said *"if you don't let people go to work on the farm, when the project is holding a meeting in the village, then who will pay tax to the Government?"* This finding is similar to those of Berends (2009).

Rich people are more likely to gain access to resources and loans than poor people. They are more likely to be able to pay back the loan. They also have more networks than poor people. This is very true in the hierarchical social structure. For example, village headmen have the highest authority in the village. This provides them access to

opportunities such as taking a loan. Poor people have less opportunity to take a loan because they are less well connected. Also, there is no guarantee that they can pay back the loan. Where NGO projects need to be successful, they are not going to choose the poorest of the village to work with because they represent the greatest risk. Project activities may make the poorest feel left out. For example, many poor women claim that because they are poor they cannot participate in the Animal Bank. For this reason, the project cannot meet the needs of the poorest of the poor in the community.

#### 6.4.8. *Women's self esteem*

The study showed that leaders naturally have higher self-esteem. Both men and women in the community see men as leaders. Also men who have leadership roles within the community appear much more confident than men from lower socio-economic strata. Women see their roles as deputy or subordinate to men. This reflects on the jobs they are given and the value that they place on themselves. For example, women have to do the work that we call '*heavy*' work but they themselves/ community refer to it as "*light work*". They recall that it is not valuable compared to men's work. This corresponds with Chittalath's (2006) report which highlights the low value placed on what women do inside the home. Women have to collect vegetables while men hunt for meat, which is more valuable. Often it is related to cultural norms for example, women do not hunt, because it takes place at night. The lack of opportunities to do certain jobs means that they never develop confidence to do them. For example, the women interviewed do not believe that they can hunt for meat like men do. As depicted in the history of Khmu people (Simana & Preisig, 1997), Khmu women symbolise the women of the underdeveloped world, who suffer from a lack of self-confidence, self denial and lack of recognition of their responsibility towards society and self.

Self-esteem of women also has an effect on their participation in development projects. This study found that women who participate in projects have more confidence next time they participate. Hence giving them an opportunity to participate is crucial for increasing their self-esteem. However, those not participating in the initial project activity tend to

withdraw completely. They do not believe they can contribute. The importance of self-esteem was also identified by Naik (1998). The headmen's wives in the two villages are very confident and seem to have higher self-esteem than other women. They have the opportunity because their husbands give them responsibility and they obtain their positions because they are the wives of village headmen.

The women in both villages appear to derive high self-esteem from having a good man or successful husband. Those who have to take responsibility because their husbands are sick do not have good self-esteem. This study found that these women actually feel ashamed that they have to take on the leadership role. Women tend to be content with the traditional role assigned to them. For example, the LWU representative in Village Two does not appear to have high self-esteem even though she has the responsibility. She still plays a serving/ subordinate roles because that is what the men expect of her. Karkas (1999), reports that many women in rural areas prefer not to have equal status with their husbands. Even educated women such as female teachers, prefer to go back to serving/ subordinate roles when required. As children tend to uphold the perceptions, attitudes, and to a large extent, the lifestyles of their parents, it is hard to inspire young girls to pursue secondary education. This is very crucial for WVL projects that focus on children and aim to increase women's participation (WVL, 2007). It is challenging to increase women's participation in the community, with women in a service role which the community does not value, and see men as leaders.

For a woman to have high self-esteem it appears that men have to give her the authority and approve her role. This might include stating the role involved especially when it is outside of cultural norms. For example, if a female villager working with WVL has to teach a group of men, it is outside the Khmu cultural norm. The organisation may develop opportunities for this to happen. The study showed that as in the GAD approach (AusAID, 1997), women's confidence comes from men in the household or community supporting them.

It is a common belief that Khmu women are lazy. Although the women themselves do not believe this, the way society portrays them is the view they choose to embrace. This is true for many other attitudes towards Khmu women. It is crucial for the staff to acknowledge these perceptions and develop their programs accordingly.

#### 6.4.9. *Staff and project approach*

The relationships between staff and the communities have a regular pattern. Staff visits only happen when there is an activity in the community. On average this is one day in each village every month. This limits the interaction between staff and the community. Observations during the study found women especially shy to interact with staff and have less confidence to participate in the project activities. The community still consider staff as visitors or strangers especially those who cannot speak Khmu. This study revealed that often project staff focus on completing their tasks when they go to the village which does not leave much time to develop relationships or to learn the language. This is worse for the village on the main road (Village One). Some staff choose to stay in the guesthouse rather than the village and consequently they find it hard to develop close relationships with the community. It is also interesting to note that women continue to cook and serve the staff during their visits. Staff visits may therefore be interpreted as burdensome. Project activities leave very limited time for staff to become familiar with the village and its dynamics. This is consistent with Lewis, (2006) who suggests that staff must spend time in the community to build trust and strengthen relationships with the community. In the Lao culture staying in someone's house makes a relationship deeper and for rural people it is a sign of respect. Only wealthy people have the privilege of having guests stay at their house. Exposure to community life is further restricted, as those who stay in the community usually stay in the village headman's house. The PLA activity is the only time that allows staff to spend more time in the village and have the chance to visit poor families.

In terms of project staff, the majority are male, especially for technical training. Few women are available to conduct training except for traditional female tasks such as

cooking and health care. However, women prefer to be trained by women and are more likely to open up, ask questions and participate in a female group. In this way, the project reinforces the role of women in these tasks. If women are trained by men they are less likely to see themselves doing the job because they think it is the men's job.

Gender training is seen by both staff and community as a woman's role. For this reason, men do not see that it is important to them. Even though women see the importance of gender equality they do not have the authority to make changes alone. Men and women need a common understanding of roles, which means involving both men and women in gender training (AusAID, 1997). Women are bored of what is said in meetings because they are not empowered to change the situation. This corresponds with IFE's (2002) report that people will participate when the topic is relevant to them and they believe that their actions count and make a difference. For women to participate and put into practice a role that is outside their cultural norm, men need to give this responsibility to women. Providing women with gender training will not bring them out of difficulty alone. Men must be supportive of change. Often it is men who attend project trainings because they are seen as formal activities. However, these include agriculture and animal raising, which are the day to day responsibilities of women. In this situation it is important men are trained to pass on information and that it is accepted by women. Alternatively women must attend trainings.

#### 6.4.10. *Village administrative structure*

Women are underrepresented politically at all levels of Government, particularly in rural communities (see Table 1. in Section 2.4). The village administrative structure only has one position for a female which is through the LWU. There are other more practical, female roles including teachers, the traditional birth attendant (TBA) and the village headman's wife. Although the role of the headman's wife is informal, it has a formal aspect. No women political representatives sit on the VDC only men. This finding is similar that of Social Development Consultants' (n.d.). Furthermore, it is culture that shapes the village administrative structure. Their cultural norm establishes men as leaders,



and this view has permeated through the administrative structure. It is also seen as important to prepare young men for this position because that is what is expected from the community.

Although the culture and village administrative structure or hierarchy is not equal, it does provide stability and it is predictable for community members. They know how to relate to the village headman in order to get something done. However, if the project staff do not understand the structure or how the activity relates to it, it is difficult for staff to contribute fully. To work effectively with the community, staff must familiarise themselves with the hierarchy of the administrative structure. First, staff must go through the village headman to obtain his support/ approval. Second, the village headman contacts the VDC and then the community (see Figure 9. in Section 5.2.3). If there are conflicts in the village, the village headman would be the first to consult. This corresponds with Lewis' (1992) who reports that elders or village leaders are very important and respected people. Therefore, this does not leave room for the LWU to play their role because voicing opinions would disturb the usual course of events. This is the challenge WVL faces in empowering the LWU representatives to empower other women in the village.

Again, if the project assumes that having the LWU representative means that gender issues have been addressed as found in the results, this is not true. District LWU representatives have a very clear job description for the LWU roles within the village administrative structure (LWU, 2007). In reality, the results show that the role of the LWU is only serving water, cleaning and cooking. WVL projects have to be aware of the LWU roles and responsibility. The project staff may be in a position to support and reinforce that role.

#### **6.4.11. *Opportunity to access project activity and capacity to control assets***

Access and control over money is often regarded as an indication of women's empowerment. This study found that the women in these Khmu communities do have access to money. However, it is clear that they do not have the final say on large

purchases. For example, they have to ask husbands first before spending. Such a similar finding was identified in Gianotten *et al*'s (1994) report.

Khmu women have the right to own land but often transfer ownership to their husbands. A previous study by GRID (2005) found Khmu inheritance practice to be '*Patrilineal*' where the family name and inheritance are transferred from father to son and women can inherit from their husbands. However, this study and FAO (2010c) found that many women bring their inheritance to the marriage but it is the men that end up being in control. For example, women choose to put their husband's name on their inherited land certificate. This was not always true for the two Khmu communities studied. In fact they practice a mix of '*Patrilineal*' and '*Diverging*' inheritance, where it is up to the family to decide who to give the inheritance to. This means there will be evidence that sometimes women are given preference/importance. If families have only daughters, the family's inheritance goes to the daughters. When they are married they transfer ownership to their husbands.

Although the man takes the responsibility, he also takes the risk for his household. Women appear less confident to take risks, for example in micro finance schemes. The results found women were not willing to sign any document unless husbands were present. Although the LWU has a goal of increasing women's participation in microfinance schemes, the schemes in the two villages studied were not specifically for women but rather for the household. Therefore women consider it the man's responsibility to take a loan. As women take the role of provider, they must be responsible and are therefore less inclined to take unnecessary risks. Because they are illiterate or unaware, they are also less likely to understand what they are dealing with. For a woman to have access to resources or microfinance they have to be in a family unit with a good man. This observation corresponds with Luangkhot & Mann's (2008) findings that "*men have power over women's access to use land resources through their control over mediation with the spirit world which regulates when and how land is used*". In practice this means that women of higher socio-economic status find it easier to access microcredit.

## 6.5. Overcoming the barriers

### 6.5.1. *Community activity*

The purpose of this study is to identify how Khmu women overcome the barriers to participate in development activities. The study found that most of the women interviewed attend community activities such as weddings, house construction and house warming. For these activities both husband and wife have a role to play. Their social obligations are recognised and have been accepted since they were young. Nobody teaches cultural norms but they are picked up by observation from parents and other role models in the community. This is important for the development of children. The study found that women are free to attend because they have the support of parent in-laws or cousins to take care of children while they attend. The activities are known as good and appropriate things to do. Therefore, everyone in the family and community provide support and opportunity for women to attend. This reason is similar to the finding of IFE (2002) that people will participate when they have support.

Taking part in community activities is not considered as participation as defined by ERISTEA (n. d). In fact it is defined by the community as '*Samaky*' (*Sharing, helping and harmony and maintain peace*), *cooperation, helping, and working as a group*. Taking part in these activities, people do not have to share opinions, make decisions or listen to people talk in a formal setting in which they are not comfortable. Instead, they contribute labour to complete the task and follow the leaders. This kind of participation was identified by Dudley (1993) and Chambers (1997). This may be why it is easier for women to overcome the barriers that they face in order to take part in these activities.

Taking part in community activities motivates people as they can see the tangible benefits such as food, having fun and exchanging the labour they need for their livelihoods. This contrasts with project activities where most benefits appear to be intangible. This is especially important for the Khmu culture because people value tangible benefits as found in the report by Lewis (1992).

### 6.5.2. *Project activities*

From the investigation, women do not appear to want to overcome barriers to participation in project activities alone. The barriers seem too big for them. Women need support from their husbands, family, community and the project. They need to be empowered with similar opportunities to men to overcome the barriers they face. This is an important reason why Khmu women do not actively participate in development projects.

This study found that women are the primary caretakers and recognise their importance in raising children. When the project forces them to attend an activity, it interrupts the daily routine. Bringing both husband and wife to the project meeting at the same time is not always good for the family unit because there is no one to take care of the children. There is no support from parent in-law's and cousins for attending project activities. Even if women bring their children with them, they cannot concentrate on the meeting especially when children cry and they have to leave the meeting room. From a quantitative perspective, the projects appear successful. The number of people attending activities is high. Similar conclusions were drawn from a study by Karl (1995). However, from a qualitative perspective, this investigation provides evidence that the project activities are not good because even though women attend they are not in a position to benefit or contribute effectively.

Women are also the primary providers in the family. To ask women to come to the project activities means taking time off from looking for food or doing household work. This trade off is likely to inspire a sense of guilt from failing in their roles as wives, mothers and daughter in-laws, and also the fear of disapproval from their husbands. The Khmu women's obligation in the family has also been identified by the LWU's (2002) study. In order to overcome the barriers they need to have something to bring into the family. In this case, incentives are one approach to increasing women's participation.

Women's low self-esteem is reinforced by their husbands and the community. They are not brave enough to attend project activities without the approval of their husbands. For example, to attend gender training and cooking sessions, women seem to face fewer barriers because they do have the support of their husbands. Moreover, the results show that women are less educated. They do not have much experience in sitting in the classroom and attending meetings because this is considered a man's job. To attend the project activities they have to be formal and speak Lao. They have to interact with outsiders who are mainly men. Women seem to be less comfortable in this situation and tend to listen instead of voicing concerns or opinions. Therefore, Khmu women do not seem motivated to overcome barriers to participation in community development projects.

#### **6.6. The role of project staff in the community**

The purpose of this study is to identify the role of development partners in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects. The role that staff play is crucial to ensure community participation. The results showed that Khmu women look up to female staff. They influence women on how they view girl's education, improved hygiene and sanitation. This is because staff are the only connection or outside influence that women in the community have. The role of the development profession has an impact on barriers to participation as reported by Botes & Rensburg (2000). Table 8 identifies the roles of field staff and their implications for Khmu women. All these roles help them relate to the community.

The actions of field staff are more powerful than they believe. The results show that when in particular female staff, takes the role of a demonstrator, it is very effective sending a message to women. For example, in Village One, the attitude of women to girl's education, health and hygiene has changed because of staff demonstration. Instead of organising formal training sessions for women which they are not comfortable with, more informal activities with voluntary participation appear more effective. It takes time for women to learn and adapt. Therefore, staff must spend more time in the community to

demonstrate to and influence the community. For example, the roles women can play in participating in development projects.

Table 8: Roles of field staff and examples

Role	Activities	Implication for women
Teacher / Trainer	Trainer dominant; direct community to do things; provide training on theory as well as practice; within their field of expertise; believe their training will provide benefits; try to explain everything clearly and in detail; provide information on rules and regulations for example for the Rice Bank.	Women have opportunity for formal training; outside woman's cultural norm; outside their knowledge; obtain information; learn and be involved in the project.
Learner	Show interest in culture, language and customs, participate in community activities; ask questions to understand community; staff are humble, voluntary interest of staff; sign of respect to community; staff pay attention and show patience.	Women feel more comfortable with staff; willing to talk and be involved with the project.
Follower	Careful to follow what the community do and not offend them; let community take a lead role in culture, spiritual practice and negotiations; and staff pay attention and show patience.	Women and community gain confidence in their cultural role accept and trust staff who show respect.
Advisor	Provide advice, bring information to community; both formal and informal; judge what is sensitive and what is not; senior staff use experience and confidence because they see a need for change; offer advice without request; believe they have the answer and are better equipped. Dominate activity or meeting by speaking.	Women passive participation; receive information; accept message if respect staff.
Demonstrator / Role Model	By action not words; set example; they see themselves as a role model for community; often informal by participating in an activity; natural behaviour, sometimes done without knowing.	Women in the community may choose to follow the example voluntarily. Often it is not a skill that is demonstrated but an attitude.
Advocate	Motivated by a sense of justice or empathy, depends on staff values and if they see opportunity to improve situation. Mostly is done by senior staff with more authority.	Women feel that people help them; women access to health services improved.

Development professionals build community capacity by providing technical knowhow through the role of a teacher, trainer or advisor. These roles are meant to improve community capacity, connect them with new knowledge and link them to new technology. However, from Nkkhah & Redzuan's (2010) perspective, they do not

encourage women's participation. In the Lao context teachers and advisors are perceived as always being right. For women to challenge or question a teacher is considered inappropriate, aggressive and shameful. They are expected to be quiet in public meetings as reported in Boas (1999).

This study showed that when staff take on a teacher, trainer or advisory role, women are particularly reluctant to share their opinions and inputs. In fact the community pretends that they agree with everything that has been said in meetings even though they do not. This is very true among poor and vulnerable people because they lack self-esteem and livelihood assets. Consequently, they do not express what they really think nor do they do what staff expect them to do. For example in this study staff commented that when they come back to the village, nothing has been done that was previously agreed. When women do not do what staff expect, they are perceived as not being honest and lazy. This creates issues with trust and influences the engagement of staff and women in the project.

The role as a learner, follower and an advocate provide opportunities for the community to be involved in the project. There are also opportunities for staff themselves to learn more about the community they work with, so they can facilitate better. Staff were willing to learn about the Khmu language and culture to help them complete their jobs. Although learning the Khmu language and understanding culture can help staff relate to women better, more assistance is required for them to take part in project activities. This is especially true because of the hierarchical administrative system. Staff in Village Two recognised that the advocacy role could help improve the situation of women in the village. For example, by encouraging Government support for the empowerment of women. Field staff are potentially in a good position to assist women because they have the opportunity to know what is actually happening in the community, Government and the organisation's policy as reported in the study by Siddique (2009).

By understanding their different roles and the implications of each, staff will be in a better position to help the community. If not problems may arise. For example staff may

dominate a group activity instead of taking a facilitator role, or a teacher/trainer role may become too directive. These roles are not equal either. For example, the teacher, follower, and demonstrator roles are less likely to put staff at risk or damage poor households. Playing the advocate role requires more skill and risks because it may be controversial. Staff can upset government or community relationships if not done appropriately. For example, if staff introduce new activities to the community without consulting Government staff first, they may not approve the activities. For this reason often only senior staff play this role. On development projects, staff must work as partners with the community and play different roles at the appropriate time.

## **6.7. Methods used to increase women's participation**

### **6.7.1. *Social approach***

There appears to be an increasing level of participation for activities with a more social focus. This perhaps explains the differences between community, project and Government activities as discussed in Section 5.4. In this study staff use a social approach to increase women's participation. This might include sharing food, drinking and joking. They believe that by doing this it helps women to become familiar with them and not be afraid of them. In order to build trust staff need to spend a reasonable amount of time with the community (Lewis, 2006). This study found that on average staff only spend one day per month in each village. Each staff member is responsible for many villages, which limits the time available for more social approaches to increase women's participation. There are perhaps more opportunities for using this approach with men rather than woman because the social activity tends to happen after the formal activity has finished or at night. It is unlikely that women would stay and socialise with staff. They have other responsibilities at home. As mentioned earlier, project activities are also considered as formal activities especially when Government representatives are present. In the formal setting villagers may be less willing to exchange openly with staff, particularly, when the village headman has an influence on who talks and what is discussed. Once women can trust staff they may share with them later in an informal setting. However, women were observed complaining outside the meetings where this



opportunity is not provided. This is the reason why staff need to make time to listen to them and be good listeners. Again this was also revealed in the study by Hove (2006).

#### **6.7.2. *Asking women to sit in front***

Staff encourage women's participation in project activities by giving women honour and respect. This is done by asking women to sit at the front and asking them questions directly, so they feel included. In general, people who sit at the front are considered important. This is also a model to show the community the importance of including women in activities and to influence how they view women's participation in the future. However, the results in Section 4.2.3 show that women are shy to sit in front of men and talk. It is hard for women to feel comfortable if they believe they are not as good as men or that they are going against cultural norms.

When asked women often do not have the confidence to answer questions. Most of the time women said '*I don't know*' and agreed with what the village headmen and other male participants said. This finding is similar to FAO's (1998) study. During the field study and interview women answered "Yes", or "No" questions. When asked for reasons '*why*' questions they laughed and were very shy. This may be because they are not used to being asked what they think. However, the results in Section 4.4.6 show that informal leaders are brave enough to talk. This is because their husbands give them authority and they also have the confidence to do so. For women with young children and poor women, it is hard for them to feel honour and respect. They are not confident to sit and talk in formal meetings. Often they prefer to sit at the back or outside and listen. From the results, poor women believe that they do not have anything to contribute and nobody would care if they did. This is one of the barriers women face that the project needs to address.

#### **6.7.3. *Using the PLA tool to identify group leaders***

One approach to increasing women's participation is to identify a group leader to encourage other women to be involved in the project activities. This study found that

women prefer to talk to their own people, in particularly women. Women are also shy to speak with men in public meetings. A group leader would represent women's voice. In order to do this WVL used the PLA tool to facilitate the process. For example, facilitators separate people into different groups (WVL, 2009a). This study showed that women feel more comfortable to talk when they break into small groups with other women. The PLA is mostly used at the beginning of the project where it seeks to assist community in identifying their needs and resources (WVL, 2009a). At this stage, it appears to be too early to identify women leaders. The process of identifying leaders takes time and is not easy. This study showed that informal leaders do not participate in project activities often. They have indirect contact with the project and staff. They appear easier to identify by female staff in an informal setting. Using the PLA tool to identify group leaders and creating separate discussion groups for men and women suits the Khmu culture.

#### 6.7.4. *Provide incentives*

Women are interested in participating in project activities that provide tangible outcomes. To increase women's participation and improve livelihoods, WVL provides incentives to the community in two forms. Firstly, in the form of a Village Fund, the Rice and Animal Banks and food security projects. They do not target women specifically. This study found that it is easy for women to recall their experience of being involved directly and indirectly in these activities that provide tangible outcomes. This finding is similar to Botes & Rensburg's (2000) observation that experience of participation encourages people to participate in future. This study also found that women who have more physical and financial capital show more interest in being involved than poor women. This may be because the poor do not have capacity to handle the risk that comes with participating in the Animal Bank and Village Fund. The risk is more significant in Village Two which has recently been resettled because the community lack social capital and choose to work independently. Overall if the project does not offer specific activities to help women generate income and access the Village Fund directly, women cannot be empowered as reported by Barefoot College (n.d.).

Another form of incentive to encourage women's participation in project activities is the use of material gifts. Educational activities such as trainings and meetings appear not to be attractive to women. The results of this study show that women interviewed do not recall what they learnt from the trainings that they attended. However, they remember the training where they received tangible benefits for example, soap, money and school materials. These incentives encourage women to come to the trainings. It also encourages them to talk and answer the questions in meetings and trainings. Even though this kind of participation is not considered as genuine and it is also costly, it is a channel to deliver the knowledge to build community and women's capacity in later stages. This was reported in the study by Botes & Rensburg (2000). In order for women to take risks in participating in project activities they need to see tangible benefits. Therefore, women may need to receive tangible benefits before they can appreciate intangible benefits. These findings are similar to those of Lewis' (1992) on how to deliver knowledge to Khmu women.

#### **6.7.5. *Using Government power***

In the context of Laos, hierarchy and a top down management significantly influence project implementation. As shown in Figure 3. Section 3.4.2. at the district level, the district authority is the highest authority and all project activities require their approval. This study showed that one way to increase women's participation is to use the power of Governmental officials. The village headman is under the district authority. Therefore, when district officials attend project activities, the village headman feels compelled to make sure that people are present. In addition, staff are more confident when they have district officials working with them. This means more people would participate in the activities. Meetings with Government official are considered as important. Therefore the village headman makes people pay a fine when they are absent (Section 5.6.5). According to Chambers (1997) this kind of top down approach to participation is at a cosmetic level. Although it ensures attendance by the community, particularly the poor, it also becomes an obligation to attend. However, usually this is the responsibility of the head of the family (men) and women only attend if there is a specific request for them to do so. From this study it appears that during the meetings, people agree with staff even though they do not mean to. This is the same when staff play the role of teacher.

This study found that the differences between the authorities used to ensure women's participation and the authority that women are comfortable with. Figure 17 shows the LWU's approach towards women's participation is well accepted by women. The LWU approach starts at the national level to the village level (vertical approach). The LWU also uses the horizontal approach, for example, the district LWU works with project staff and the village headman and then the village LWU representative and finally the local women. However, women prefer a combination of bottom up and informal approach such as talking with other women when they get together. Women prefer to talk and share with other women near their house and then talk to their husbands. Next, they prefer to talk to female staff and then to the village headman and finally if necessary to district Government staff. Women do not seek to talk to the LWU representative. The LWU representative does not seem to have any influence on women because she is not recognised as a leader. This does not correspond with roles and responsibility of the LWU (2007).

To improve women's participation in project activities, there is a need to increase the number of female staff and identify women group leaders. The results show that leaders do not have to be the LWU representative in order to influence other women. Section 5.5.5 indicates women prefer to talk and share with their friends who live close by. Therefore, projects may benefit from identifying informal leaders and working closely with them.

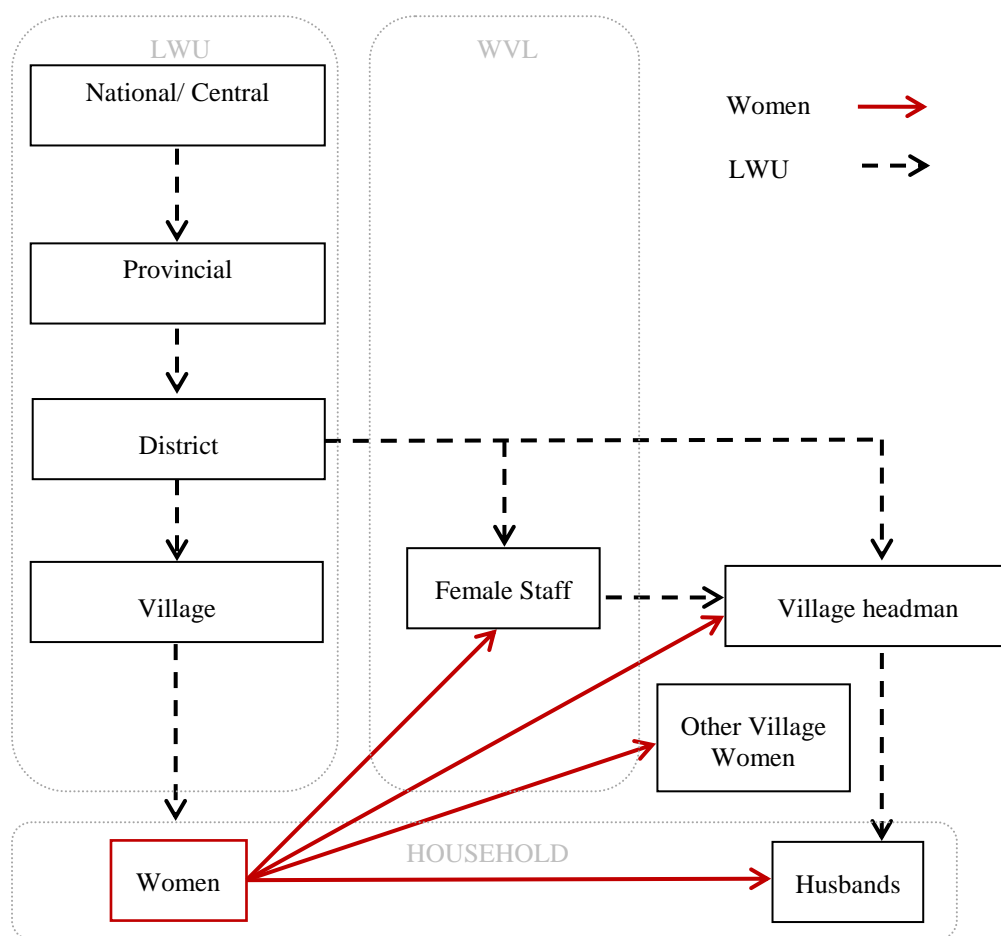


Figure 17: The LWU's channel of communication towards women's participation

#### 6.7.6. *Inviting women directly*

Inviting women directly to attend activities increases their participation. When project staff and village headmen ask women to participate in activities, they are obliged to attend. They are also more likely to recognise it as a women's activity. This study found more women participate in activities related to mother and child health care, cooking, weaving and gender training. However, labelling project activities can indirectly divide men and women according to perceived roles (FAO,1998). This kind of approach is similar to WID's approach (Ramji, 1997), where development only focused on women. It is clear from this investigation that Khmu women depend on men to gain access to resources and power. Therefore, targeting women alone is not sufficient to empower them and help them overcome the barriers to participation. Women can attend activities but

they cannot make any changes. As in the GAD approach (AusAID, 1997), in order to make changes, women need support from institutions, social organisations and men's involvement.

## **6.8. Conclusion**

The concept of participation as 'decision-making' which is identified by the Lao Government does not exist in the Khmu culture. Staff and community members have a different understanding of the concept of participation. This makes it difficult for WVL to improve participation in the project and consequently in community activities. Khmu women play traditional roles such as cooking, serving, following and informing. These roles do not put women in a position where they can fully participate in project activities. Barriers that women are facing prevent them participating in development activities. The barriers come from history and culture, socio-economic, local structure, dynamics of the project activities and actions of staff. Women do not try to overcome the barriers because they are too big for them to do alone. Women also lack self-esteem and the opportunity to participate in development projects, particularly poor people. However, to help women overcome the barriers to participation, different staff use different approaches which do not always meet the needs of women. The next Chapter will provide recommendations on how to improve women's participation.

## Chapter Seven: Conclusion and Recommendations

### 7.1. Introduction

This study explored Khmu women's participation in community development projects in Luang Prabang Province, Laos PDR. From personal experience as a Lao-Tai woman who was born in a rural village, I understand community and rural life. Through my experience working with development projects, I became familiar with ethnic diversity and the differences between rural and urban, rich and poor, men and women's roles, literacy, language and education. However, I remain intrigued with these differences and especially with the lack of participation by Khmu women. The main objective for this study was to explore Khmu women's participation in community development projects. The study focuses on the following research questions:

- *Do women experience barriers to participating in project activities?*
  - a. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community?
  - b. What are the barriers for Khmu women to participate in the development project?
  - c. How do they overcome these barriers?
- *What is the role of development partners and related government agencies in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects?*

To answer these questions I started with reviewing the literature on the Lao context and the theory and practice of participation and empowerment. The Lao context and geography have always been a challenge for development of the country and people in rural and isolated areas. Laos is ethnically diverse and many groups live in rural areas. Khmu people are the second largest ethnic group in Laos and they are the poorest. They have lacked political power and had limited involvement in administration. They have also had limited participation in formal education and lagged behind in socio-economic development. The Lao Government outlines the National Growth and Poverty Eradication Strategy (NGPES) to improve access to development. The Lao Women's Union (LWU) is the Government agency that is responsible for the advancement of the Lao women. The

Lao Government also depends on foreign development aid for development of the country. This focuses on vulnerable groups including ethnic communities and women.

Development began as a top-down approach but today has a more participatory focus. The theory and practice of participation has no definite definition. It is different in different contexts and may be classified in different types and levels. Barriers to participation are found in many different areas from institutions to social, cultural, technical and logistical barriers. There are many approaches to improve women's participation. The latest approach is Gender and Development (GAD) which identifies that to improve the status of women requires the active participation of men. Both men and women in the community participate in different activities at different levels. Women participate more in household chores, health care and subsistence agriculture while men participate more on a political level, attending meetings, leading and making decisions. In the community, the village headmen and the LWU representatives are the key contact for development organisation like WVL to implement activities.

The research questions were answered through field based case studies of two village Area Development Programs (ADP) implemented by World Vision Laos. Qualitative research methods including in-depth interviews and observations were used. Through the analysis, results and discussion, the research questions were addressed. The findings provide a picture of Khmu women's participation. This final Chapter summarises these and provides recommendations for WVL, its staff and the LWU. Finally, suggestions are made for further research.

## **7.2. Summary of Main findings**

This study found that there is no direct translation for the word 'participation' in the Khmu language. The Lao word '*Khan Mee Soun Houm*' is often used instead. This word has different meanings for different people. For example, for some women it means '*Samaky*' which means sharing, helping and maintaining peace. For some people it means '*contribution*', '*cooperation*', '*working as a group*' and '*share opinion*'. The idea of



participation is associated with the material terms. It is a challenge for development partners to achieve the goals and objectives of their projects if staff and community do not have the same understanding of participation, particularly if the concept of participation does not exist in the culture of the communities concerned.

To answer the question whether Khmu women experience barriers to participation in project activities, the roles of women within the community were studied. Women have roles to play in community events. These roles are the same roles as the roles they play in the household, including cooking, cleaning and caring. In community events such as the Khmu New Years, wedding ceremonies and building houses, women know their role and their place. Therefore, there is no problem concerning their participation. Women take up these roles in the household and community from childhood. They watch and learn from their mothers, women leaders and other community members. The roles of women in the community have implications for how women participate in development activities. Women often continue in their traditional roles of servings and cleaning which is different from the staff or organisations expectations of them to participate actively in decision making.

Khmu women do experience barriers to participation in project activities. The study identified many barriers that prevent women's participation. Language barriers are a major barrier. Few Khmu women speak the Lao language that staff use in project activities. Although project staff do not know the Khmu language they do not use a translator. Sometimes staff choose to guess what the community members are saying or have conversations translated by the village headman. Women are more comfortable and prefer to speak in their own language. The study identified cultural norms which prevent women's participation. For example, women cannot go out at night and travel far from home. They have to take care of children. However, project constraints may require meetings to be held at night which are not appropriate for women to attend. Workload is a major barrier that women face. Women are primarily responsible for household chores, caring for children and agriculture. Because no one shares in the housework or taking care of the children, there is not much time left for women to attend project activities. Even

when they attend they find it difficult to concentrate because they have children with them.

The study also found that low levels of education prevent women being involved in the Village Committee which has a key role in making decisions regarding community development. Members of the Village Committee must be literate. Many women cannot meet this requirement. Health issues of women and their children also prevent them from taking part in project activities. Being sick prevents women from taking part in agricultural production and project activities. This makes women lose confidence and not feel worthwhile compared to their husbands. The major barrier found in Village Two was social issues arising from resettlement. The resettlement area is far from the women's farms and they have to walk a long distance to access their agricultural land. As a result of that distance, they stay at their farms and are not available to attend the project activities. The community in the resettlement area of Village Two lacks social capital. Because of relatively recent resettlement they are new to each other. So, the groups from different villages do not help each other, only their own village members.

Poverty was found as a barrier for women to participate in the project activities. Because of poverty people have to work harder. They do not have much time left to do other things. Also other practical participation is likely to be restricted due to the lack of financial resources, or knowledge and skill. Low self-esteem is another barrier found in the study. Low self-esteem isolates women from project activities. The women interviewed believe that they are not capable like their husbands. Their job is not as important as their husbands. They are perceived as being lazy and do not feel that they can contribute anything. They depend on their husbands to attend project activities.

The limited time available to staff to interact with the community means they continue to be seen as visitors and strangers to the community. This does not encourage women to participate in activities. Also there are fewer female staff trainers which means women do not feel comfortable to attend. Some project activities such as the Animal Bank and

Village Fund do not allow poor people to take part as it can put them at financial risk. The study also found that the existing village administrative structure is a barrier for women to be involved in the development process. Most of the leaders are men. Only the TBA and the LWU provide formal participation in the existing structure. The LWU has an important role in development. However, this role has not been fulfilled among many ethnic groups in remote areas. It is easy for project staff to assume that the LWU covers women's issues, but this may not always be the situation.

The last barrier to women's participation is access to project activities and control over assets. Legally women have a right to participate in development and control over assets. In practice, women are considered as secondary and not the head of the household. It is not a priority for them to participate in any meetings or project activities. The Khmu practice '*Patrilineal*' inheritance, where the family name and inheritance are transferred from father to son. Women access resources through their husband. In this situation women are not involved or given responsibilities apart from their household chores and farm work.

The study found that women do not try to overcome these barriers. This is because the barriers are greater for them to overcome alone. They also lack self-esteem and opportunity to participate in development projects, particularly poor people. In addition, when women and the community do not value education especially for girls' education, it makes it hard for women to be involved in development activities. To overcome these barriers, women need support from their family, the community and opportunities from the project.

The study found that staff play different roles at different times including both explicit and implicit roles such as teacher /trainer, learner, follower, advisor, demonstrator, model and advocate. These roles have implications for women's participation. The teacher and advisor roles are necessary for project activities. However, they remain a barrier to women's participation when they are in a formal setting. The learner and follower roles

encourage women's participation but need to be balanced with project goals. The model and advocate role are effective to increase women's participation but they are not easy to put into practice. It needs skill and experience because they can put both staff and community at risk.

In academia people want to find answers for everything. However, issues such as relationships, gender equality and participation are not well defined. Many factors are involved including how staff understand and reflect on the meaning of participation. This study found that different staff use different methods to increase women's participation. By reflecting on the findings of this study staff can become more aware of their potential contribution to development activities. Although staff have experience working with the community, they need to prepare and be willing to learn all the time.

### **7.3. Constraints of this study**

Due to the limited availability of Governmental officials, many of the planned activities with women could not take place or be observed during the research period. Also many husbands of the women interviewed were not at home so their views on women's participation were not captured. Consequently, their perceptions about participation could not be compared either. Finally language is a barrier to understand everything because there are many words that do not exist in the Khmu language such as participation.

### **7.4. Recommendations**

The recommendations below are for World Vision Laos (WVL), the Lao Women's Union (LWU) to improve their supports of women in overcoming the barriers to participation in development projects. These recommendations are based on the field study and literature reviewed. Each recommendation is identified as **R #:** and a summary is listed in Appendix IV.

#### 7.4.1. *World Vision Laos*

##### ○ **Language and translation**

In this study, language barriers were identified as a severe constraint for effective communication between WVL staff and the Khmu people. There are few native Khmu speakers in WVL. The results show not being able to speak the local language stops them working with community effectively. Also staff are not motivated enough to learn the Khmu language because of the lack of incentives. WVL does not have a practical policy to encourage staff to communicate with Khmu women in the Khmu language. It is recommended that WVL

**R #1:** Recruits more Khmu field staff.

**R #2:** Allocate money for language training for staff so that they can learn Khmu and/or offer staff a financial bonus for speaking the local language proficiently.

Ideally at least one person in the project team should know the Khmu language when working with the community. A translator should help staff and community to be more aware of what is going on. For example, the translator can sit at the back and observe what people are concerned about.

As the study showed often Government staff and village headmen are used as translators for project meetings with no formal training. It is important for example, to check and repeat what the community say to make sure staff understand correctly and help develop relationships. All people that are involved in facilitation and translation in the field would benefit from training, including project and Government staff, and the village headman. At the very least a list of the Khmu words that are likely to be used could be provided and help improve communication among development partners and the community.

**R #3:** Provide trainings on the importance of correct translation and facilitation.

- **Training**

The study found that the gap between the community and field staff understanding of participation is not as significant as the gap between staff and their organisations.

Understanding how Khmu women see participation would help staff to develop more effective projects as they would have better understanding of what is feasible for Khmu women and their expectations.

**R #4:** Include a training to discuss the communities' definition/perspectives of participation (see Table 6).

There is evidence from some households that women can overcome barriers to participate with the consideration and support of men. Gender training of men and women together could create awareness around sharing workload and encouraging wives to be involved in project activities. If men are the only people to come to trainings or meetings it is important that at the end of the meetings or trainings they pass on the information to their wives. The best way to empower women is to encourage husbands and wives to work together as a team. It is better to encourage both husband and wife to have a good relationship so that women do not need special gender training.

**R #5:** Include both men and women for gender training.

**R #6:** Staff repeat the message that husbands are to tell their wives.

The study found that women are prepared to talk in smaller groups of women. However, when men are involved they keep quiet. It is clear that training for women should be more informal to make them feel more comfortable. Alternatively women's roles can be made more formal so they know they have a role to play and emphasise the importance of women's role in project activities.

**R #7:** WVL and the LWU consider public speaking training for both formal and informal women leaders to empower them to represent women's voice. This could also be encouraged in the classroom among students.

## ○ **Participation**

The investigation showed that the roles that staff play have an impact on the community and women's participation. Therefore, both women and staff must be aware that they play many different roles in project activities and in the community. Also staff must be aware that what they say has an impact on the communities' understanding and the quality of participation. The WVL participation ladder focuses on community participation, which is good but it is important to recognise that the roles staff play have implications for women's participation.

**R #8:** Organises training to raise awareness among staff of the roles they play in the community and their implications for women's participation.

As shown in Table 6 different perspectives of participation were expressed. WVL staff, policy and the community require a more consistent understanding of participation. This investigation found that the staff evaluation of women's participation in project activities currently focuses on quantity and not so much on quality. For example, staff consider the number of participants to be involved in planning projects but overlooked how they are to be engaged in project activities.

**R #9:** When planning new projects that staff consider the balance between the quantity and quality of participation to achieve appropriate levels of participation for the community and especially for vulnerable groups such as women..

One way to encourage participation identified in this study is to spend more time getting to know the community. Relationships can be built through involvement in informal activities. These are hard to schedule but it is important to include them in the plan. This is particularly important for women who are more likely to respond to development initiatives in an informal social setting with men. For example, social meals are an important part of community life and should not be overlooked.

**R #10:** Staff schedule time to take part in social activities with women in the community and not just the Village Committee.

- **Child focus**

The study showed that children take up roles in the family, community and projects from observing their parents and other role models. WVL must continue to focus on the vision statement that focuses on children and ensure children see good role models in their mothers.

**R #11:** Identify and promote good role models for Khmu children.

The study showed that women value tangible benefits. WVL should continue to provide gifts to school children to encourage them to go to school and to motivate parents to keep their children at school and be rewarded for leadership. WVL already has *'food for work'* programs that have been successful in improving community livelihoods.

**R #12:** Set up a *'food for education'* program which provides free rice to poor families if their children attend primary school. Through is parents can support both boys and girls to attend school

- **Women's barriers**

The study identified many barriers women face to participate in development activities (Table 7). Being aware of these can help when planning for activities so that women become active participants.

**R #13:** Field staff identify the barriers women face in the communities where they work and consider these in planning and implementing projects.

The study identified some negative proverbs that exist in Khmu communities which have a huge influence on how women see themselves, how they behave and what their husbands and the community expect of them. The LWU are aware of these proverbs and beliefs.

**R #14:** Staff should be aware of proverbs and beliefs that depower women and reinforce the positive ones that benefit both men and women.



- **Resettlement**

As shown in the study the relationships of community members in Village Two have been upset as a result of resettlement. Many people do not want to participate in development activities because they do not trust each other. To ensure participation the social impacts of resettlement or migration must be addressed before development can be effective.

Migration and resettlement are a particular challenge to women's roles which might lead to additional workload. This highlights the importance of adapting the program to the specific conditions of the community. Part of WVL's role is to be aware of these issues. However, it is also an opportunity for WVL to empower women for example by setting up new structures in which women can be involved.

**R #15:** Organise activities that build understanding among community groups and rebuild social capital to prevent additional burdens on vulnerable groups including women.

- **Roles of staff**

The study clearly identifies the significant roles staff play in women's participation, particularly because they are the only outside connection women know and see. The role of WVL and the LWU are as facilitators and a bridge for the community with the rest of society. By seeing good gender role models children may grow up and understand how to work together and respect each other. The staff team are important models for gender equality in the community.

**R #16:** Role playing or drama involving the community could be organised as a project activity, to challenge traditional gender roles that disadvantage women and provide alternatives.

- **Working with women/the community**

This study found that Khmu women prefer to engage with female staff. They also prefer to use social networks in the community to share information with other women.

**R #17:** Staff include more informal or social approaches to encourage women's participation in the community and development activities.

**R #18:** Look at gender balance in recruitment of field staff to help women relate to project activities.

**R #19:** Rich women could help empower poorer women through project activities such as the Animal Bank where community members pair up to raise animals together and exchange lessons learnt.

Women in Village Two complained that they lost money through microfinance activities. These activities mean to empower women and to be managed by women. However, the study shows that poor women have less opportunity to be involved in these activities. It is important that activities that are designed to help poor women do not actually put poor households at a higher risk.

**R #20:** Staff should evaluate project activities to see if they benefit women specifically or make them more vulnerable.

**R #21:** Income generating or microfinance activities could be developed to be managed and controlled by woman to empower them.

The fact that staff are not able to provide the details of the communities with which they work shows that they do not really know about the community.

**R #22:** Staff spend more time with the community to build relationships. Where possible they could share in tasks such as cooking to create a sense of unity. Where staff cannot stay overnight with poor families, they have to find time during the day to visit.

**R #23:** While working with women staff should be willing to listen to what they have to say, be aware of how to listen and where to listen and repeat what they say to show that staff care about them.

The VDC was introduced by WVL to benefit women and poor people generally. However, most of the representatives are men because women do not meet the criteria for membership such as literacy. This means there are few opportunities for women to be in

the leadership position or to learn the skills necessary. The younger women who have an education may have more opportunities when they are older. When WVL introduce new structures to benefit women it is important they actually empower them.

**R #24:** Staff encourage the VDC to select women to be deputies so that women can learn and be familiar with the role of leaders.

- **Culture awareness**

WVL also has many good policies in place for example on issues of gender and ethnicity. However, it does not matter if WVL or the LWU have a good policy, what makes the difference is individuals and culture. For example, in the Khmu culture it is inappropriate for women to attend project activities at night time. It is important to ensure meetings are held when women can attend.

**R #25:** Organise activities that suit the Khmu culture. This requires staff to be aware of their cultural norms and how to relate to them.

#### 7.4.2. *The Lao Women's Union*

- **Trainings**

The study found that LWU representatives in the village are not aware of their roles. The Village Committees also do not encourage them to exercise their roles or provide them with training.

**R #26:** The district LWU conduct thorough trainings on the roles and responsibilities of village LWU representatives, in addition to a written job description. The Village Committee could attend to ensure they can provide support.

Mainly women participate in gender training in the village conducted by LWU. Often gender training is seen as separate from technical training. Women usually cannot make changes without their husbands support. The study found that headmen shared some of the housework with their wives and would be good role models for other households.

**R #27:** Include both men and women in their gender training activities, and look at the dynamics of gender roles, workload and child care which limit women's participation in development projects.

**R #28:** Gender training is integrated with technical training for example, animal raising or income generation activities, to encourage gender issues to be addressed in mainstream activities.

#### ○ **Support**

Men's support is essential for women's participation, and so it is important to engage them in the LWU strategy. It is important to understand men's perspectives and those of organisations to understand how these affect women's participation. For example the Village Committee and men often have a central role in events.

**R #29:** The LWU and development partners work together to arrange International Women's Day celebrations in Khmu communities. This could be extended to other shared initiatives.

There are not many Khmu women leaders in political positions or within the LWU. However, there are many poor rural ethnic women who require support and understanding. Mothers and their role in taking care of children are important for the future of Laos and must be valued. However, this study showed that mothers do not value their own daughters' education as much as sons'. As a result of this people do not want to invest in girls' education. Unless the perception is changed, women will continue to lack education. Development partners such as WVL have an important role to play in supporting the LWU to be more effective in its civil society role.

**R #30:** Increase the membership and leadership of ethnic women in the organisation to represent the needs of ethnic women specifically.

**R #31:** Encourage mothers and parents to change their perception about education among girls by supporting girls going to school. This will help them understand Lao and to take part in education. This could be done through *'food for education program'*.

**R #32:** Should continue to encourage trainees or graduate students to work in rural communities and provide them with experience in schools and development organisations.

○ **Role models**

As shown in this study, Khmu women have low self-esteem. Their roles are not recognised as important. Often they are seen as being lazy and having no leadership capacity.

**R #33:** Set up women role models to popularise what Khmu women are capable of doing. Also male role models could help promote/empower positive values of women.

**R #34:** Organise role play trainings on household roles. Through these both men and women could observe and reflected on their position in the household and the interests of others.

7.4.3. ***Future research***

Future research could repeat this study in different ethnic groups and areas. This study provides a benchmark on how to improve women's participation. However, there is a scope for more research on this topic. Although it appears in this research that poor people were not involved in many project activities, future research could investigate if development projects actually help the poor, especially poor women. This information would help development partners and poor people to design their programs better.

This study looked at how staff roles influence the community and women's participation. This would be very helpful if the future research could look at good role models or successful stories about women in Khmu culture so that development projects can use them to improve women's participation and self-esteem.

This study identified problems in the resettled village. Further study could be conducted in the resettlement areas or communities experiencing migrations to examine how resettlement may provide opportunities to transform cultural norms on gender, and empower women. And how resettlement could be facilitated by good supportive policies for example developing health infrastructure.

This study looked at the informal women leaders. It would be very useful for future research to investigate how staff can identify these leaders and involve them in development projects such as micro-enterprise development (small shop).

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## Appendices

### Appendix I: Coding system

Codes	Explanation
WV1C	Women village 1 committee's wife
WV1 SE	Women village 1 second wife
WV1H	Women village 1 headman wife
WV1M	Women village 1 mount
WV1Y	Women village 1 yeng
WV1ST	Women village 1 husband is student
WV1D	Women village 1 deng
WV2C	Women village 2 committee's wife
WV2SH	Women village 2 shy
WV2P	Women village 2 poor
WV2S	Women village 2 sick
WV2A	Women village 2 above
WV2L	Women village 2 Lao women
WV1L	Women village 1 Lao women
HSE	Husband of second wife
VH1	Village1 Headman
VH2	Village 2 Headman
CM	Committee member
S2VF	Village 2 Village Fund staff
S2RB	Village 2 Rice Bank staff
S2AB	Village 2 Animal Bank staff
S1VF	Village 1 Village Fund staff
S1RB	Village 1 Rice Bank staff
S1AB	Village 1 Animal Bank staff
MA	Manager
DME	Program design staff

## **Appendix II: Research Information Sheet**

### Lincoln University

*Division:* Commerce

### Research Information Sheet

Thank you for making time to be part in an interview.

I am undertaking research for a master of Applied Science in International Rural Development at Lincoln University, New Zealand

You are invited to participate as a subject in the project entitled: Women's participation in community development projects: The case of Khmu women in Laos.

The aim of this study is to explore Khmu women's participation in development projects in Luang Prabang Province, Laos PDR

The research will gain understanding of if women experience barriers in participating in project activities?

- a. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community?
- b. What are the barriers for Khmu women to participate in the development project?
- c. How do women overcome these barriers?

What is the role of development partners and related government agencies in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects?

You have been selected to participate in the interview. However, you have choice to participate and not participate in the interview.

The interview will use a tape recorder to record the interview so I can transcribe and use it in analysis later.

I have prepared an outline guide for this semi-structured interview, but I am really interested in what you have to say. There are no right or wrong answers.

Your answers will be very useful to this study. Your task is to feel free to answer and share your opinion about the topic questions.

If you would like clarification at any time please let me know.

If you are not happy or not comfortable to continue with the interview, then you have the right to withdraw.

If you want to withdraw the data you have provided you can do so up to before I leave the village

You also have right to refuse to answer any question if you do not want to.

The interview will be conducted face-to-face and one-by-one.

The initial interview will take up to 1 hour and in case of the need for further clarification or follow up question, you will be asked to interview again but this will be done in the principle of your voluntary.

The results of the project may be published; I will be assured of the complete anonymity of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public without your consent. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality the following steps will be taken.

Your name will not be part of the data analysed. Your name will be kept in confidence, only my two academic supervisors and I will have access to the information. Your name will be given a numerical code, which is used only in case it is necessary to follow up with some further questions for clarification later. The findings and presentation of the data will not include your name.

Would you be willing to participate in this interview? If so I would like to ask permission to record the interview.

Yes ☐ No ☐

The project is being carried out by:

*Name of principal researcher*                      Kongchay Vixathep

*Contact details*                                      Kongchay.vixathep@lincolnuni.ac.nz

He/She will be pleased to discuss any concerns you have about participation in the project.

*Name of Supervisor*                              Rupert Tipples

*(If you are a staff member seeking HEC approval please provide Group Leader/Division Director details)*

*Contact Details*                                      Rupert.Tipples@lincoln.ac.nz

The project has been reviewed and approved by Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

## Appendix III: Guiding Questions

### Research Questions:

Do women experience barriers to participating in project activities?

- a. What are the roles of women within the Khmu community?
- b. What are the barriers for Khmu women to participate in the development project?
- c. How do women overcome these barriers?

What is the role of development partners and related government agencies in involving the Khmu women in participation in community development projects?

### *Guiding questions for women*

Ask women to tell stories of their involvement in the community and development activities to answer the following questions:

#### Participation in household

1. What roles do women play in the family and food security?
2. What kind of activities do women do each day? ( 24 hours activities)
3. Who owns what (land, house, money)? How is land being distribute?
4. What kind of education system is there in the Khmu community?
5. Do men share information about the meetings?
6. Do men consult with women when making decisions?
7. What really happen about decision making? To what extent do women make decision, on what and how?
8. What do women think about their daughter's education and the future of women in the community?
9. What is the education level of women?

#### Participation in Community

1. What roles do women have in the community?
2. What are the normal social activities in the community?
3. What kind of activities do women participate in? Why?
4. What do women think about the activities / Are they helpful?
5. In what kind of activities women do not want to be involved? Why?
6. How do women share information with other people? Inside versus outside the household?
7. What is the meaning of ownership?
8. What does Land ownership mean to Khmu? How does it make a difference?

9. What/where do women meet and discuss?
10. What does community expect about women? What do they think women should be?
11. What do they think about themselves? What do they think they can do or can be? Do they have confident that they can do a good job like men? Do they believe in themselves?
12. Do women trust men to do everything? What do they think about men?

#### Participation in development projects

1. How do women participate in the development project activities?
2. What roles do women play in the development project activities?
3. How often do women participate in the activities/ or are they only substitutes when men are not available?
4. What are the benefits of the projects?
5. Do women want to participate in the project activities? Why?
6. What motivates women to participate in the project activities?
7. Do women face any barriers to participate in the project activities?
8. How do women help other people to participate?
9. What do they understand by participation?

#### *Guiding questions for men*

1. What do they understand by participation?
2. What do they think about women's participation?
3. Do men share information about the meeting?
4. Do men consult with women when making decision?
5. How do they spend their time and describe how much time they spend time doing things?
6. What do men expect from women? What do they think women should be?

#### *Guiding questions for project staff*

Ask staff to tell about their experience working with Khmu women

#### Khmu women

1. What difficulties do project staff experience working with Khmu women?
2. What is the perception of Khmu women amongst WVL project staff?
3. What level of participation does WVL expect from Khmu women in development projects?

#### Khmu culture

1. What are the kind of project activities that suite the Khmu culture the most?
2. What are the significant issues that the project comes across when working with Khmu culture?
3. What are the cultural challenges for the project staff working with the Khmu?
4. What are the best ways of working with Khmu culture?



5. What are the strengths of Khmu culture that the project is trying to support?
6. How does the project deal with the spiritual belief?

#### Project staff

1. How much time do project staff spend with the Khmu?
2. Are staff aware of the Khmu culture? Are staff trained about the Khmu culture and beliefs?
3. What is the staff's views of participation?

#### Development Projects

1. Do projects have particular activities for women? What are the responses from the women?
2. What are the approaches used to encourage women to participate?

#### *Village headmen*

1. What does he think about women's participation?
2. How is land distributed in the rural community?
3. What is the system of land ownership?
4. Who has right to use and to own:
  - Land inheritance?
  - Community right?
  - Land for clearing?
  - Right to use forest?

#### *The Lao Women's Union (LWU)*

- What is the role of the LWU in the village (What do they do? What trainings do they provide? What activities does LWU in the village organise? How does it help other women in the village? How does it support the project?)

## **Appendix IV: List of Recommendations**

World Vision Laos

### **○ Language and translation**

**R #1:** Recruits more Khmu field staff.

**R #2:** Allocate money for language training for staff so that they can learn Khmu and/or offer staff a financial bonus for speaking the local language proficiently.

**R #3:** Provide trainings on the importance of correct translation and facilitation.

### **○ Training**

**R #4:** Include a training to discuss the communities' definition/perspectives of participation (see Table 6).

**R #5:** Include both men and women for gender training.

**R #6:** Staff repeat the message that husbands are to tell their wives.

**R #7:** WVL and the LWU consider public speaking training for both formal and informal women leaders to empower them to represent women's voice. This could also be encouraged in the classroom among students.

### **○ Participation**

**R #8:** Organises training to raise awareness among staff of the roles they play in the community and their implications for women's participation.

**R #9:** When planning new projects that staff consider the balance between the quantity and quality of participation to achieve appropriate levels of participation for the community and especially for vulnerable groups such as women.

**R #10:** Staff schedule time to take part in social activities with women in the community and not just the Village Committee.

- **Child focus**

**R #11:** Identify and promote good role models for Khmu children.

**R #12:** Set up a '*food for education*' program which provides free rice to poor families if their children attend primary school. Through is parents can support both boys and girls to attend school

- **Women's barriers**

**R #13:** Field staff identify the barriers women face in the communities where they work and consider these in planning and implementing projects.

**R #14:** Staff should be aware of proverbs and beliefs that depower women and reinforce the positive ones that benefit both men and women.

- **Resettlement**

**R #15:** Organise activities that build understanding among community groups and rebuild social capital to prevent additional burdens on vulnerable groups including women.

- **Roles of staff**

**R #16:** Role playing or drama involving the community could be organised as a project activity, to challenge traditional gender roles that disadvantage women and provide alternatives.

- **Working with women/the community**

**R #17:** Staff include more informal or social approaches to encourage women's participation in the community and development activities.

**R #18:** Look at gender balance in recruitment of field staff to help women relate to project activities.

**R #19:** Rich women could help empower poorer women through project activities such as the Animal Bank where community members pair up to raise animals together and exchange lessons learnt.

**R #20:** Staff should evaluate project activities to see if they benefit women specifically or make them more vulnerable.

**R #21:** Income generating or microfinance activities could be developed to be managed and controlled by woman to empower them.

**R #22:** Staff spend more time with the community to build relationships. Where possible they could share in tasks such as cooking to create a sense of unity. Where staff cannot stay overnight with poor families, they have to find time during the day to visit.

**R #23:** While working with women staff should be willing to listen to what they have to say, be aware of how to listen and where to listen and repeat what they say to show that staff care about them.

**R #24:** Staff encourage the VDC to select women to be deputies so that women can learn and be familiar with the role of leaders.

- **Culture awareness**

**R #25:** Organise activities that suit the Khmu culture. This requires staff to be aware of their cultural norms and how to relate to them.

The Lao Women's Union

- **Trainings**

**R #26:** The district LWU conduct thorough trainings on the roles and responsibilities of village LWU representatives, in addition to a written job description. The Village Committee could attend to ensure they can provide support.

**R #27:** Include both men and women in their gender training activities, and look at the dynamics of gender roles, workload and child care which limit women's participation in development projects.

**R #28:** Gender training is integrated with technical training for example, animal raising or income generation activities, to encourage gender issues to be addressed in mainstream activities.

○ **Support**

**R #29:** The LWU and development partners work together to arrange International Women's Day celebrations in Khmu communities. This could be extended to other shared initiatives.

**R #30:** Increase the membership and leadership of ethnic women in the organisation to represent the needs of ethnic women specifically.

**R #31:** Encourage mothers and parents to change their perception about education among girls by supporting girls going to school. This will help them understand Lao and to take part in education. This could be done through '*food for education program*'.

**R #32:** Should continue to encourage trainees or graduate students to work in rural communities and provide them with experience in schools and development organisations.

○ **Role models**

**R #33:** Set up women role models to popularise what Khmu women are capable of doing. Also male role models could help promote/empower positive values of women.

**R #34:** Organise role play trainings on household roles. Through these both men and women could observe and reflected on their position in the household and the interests of others.